You Like Me, Don't You?
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So, wanna go out with me?
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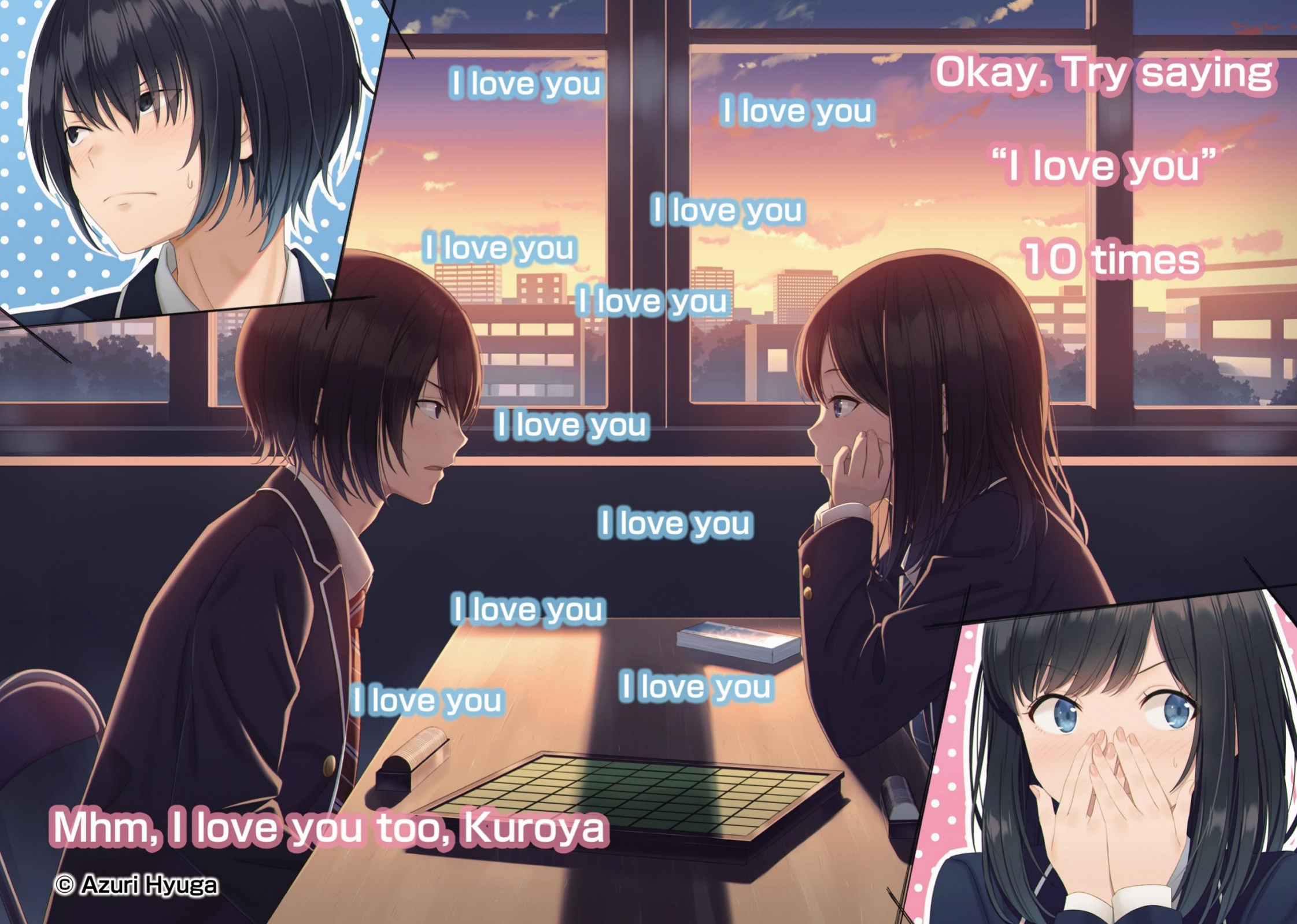
I love you
I love you
Okay. Try saying
“I love you”
I love you
10 times
I love you
I love you
I love you
I love you
I love you
I love you
I love you
Mhm, I love you too, Kuroya
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HEYO!
CAN YOU SEE ME?
Didn't know getting constantly teased was part of this game...
...But I might even get used to it.

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I must say, though...
...I clearly still didn't know what it even meant to play that game called 'love' at all.

What counts as winning or losing when you play the game called 'love'?
Kasumi Shiramori
A member of the literature club, as well as one of the school's four heavenly beauties.
She really likes our protagonist Kuroya!

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Prologue

Throughout human history, what exactly has constituted who the winners and losers are?

Competition has always been a crucial part of human existence, and because of that fact, it was no surprise that the world has become filled with labels that people use to constantly judge others when it comes to their abilities. The ever-elusive game, known as "Love," was no exception.

That previous simile would, however, beg the question: if this game contained both a winners and losers camp, then what would be the winning conditions? Of course, the term "love" has never had a universally accepted meaning; it came in a variety of shapes and forms. One could even claim that depending on who you asked, you would get a different interpretation of what "love" meant—with said interpretations equally prone to change throughout life.

Having said that, amidst these countless answers, none of them incorrect, a common decisive factor would have to exist: that whoever had their feelings reciprocated would be the winner, and whoever's confession was rejected would be the loser. That conclusion was as valid as any other, but even for a notion as mottled as "love," that one winning condition was something just about anyone could agree on.

The ultimate objective would undoubtedly be to date the apple of your eye. Anyone who managed to achieve such a feat would be praised to the high heavens as a champion worthy of immense reverence, while simultaneously inviting hostility and scorn from those less fortunate.

"Love" can make for a complex and challenging game to complete, but the winning conditions will never change. All you have to do is get with your crush.

Such were the prolonged musings of Soukichi Kuroya, a high-school student who's lived his life devoid of anything even close to resembling a romantic experience. Despite this, he felt he had a vague idea of what "love" meant. But it would appear that Soukichi was yet to fully comprehend the true implications behind the game of "love." He would soon discover, though, that it was far more labyrinthian than he could have ever imagined.

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Classes were over for the day, and there was only one other person in the clubroom with Soukichi.

"Reversi's pretty fun, huh?" his senior, Kasumi—who was sitting across from him—said as she moved the white disks on top of the green board on the table they were sat at. She then proceeded to flip all the black disks she

had outflanked over using her slender fingers. “It kinda feels like real life, in a way.”

“How exactly?” Soukichi asked.

“Hmm... Like, life is filled with ups and downs! Black and white, you get me?” she loosely explained with a chuckle. Her lack of profound meaning behind the comment brought about a frustrated sigh from Soukichi, as he in turn shifted his own black disks along the board.

He then contemplated a random trivia fact regarding Reversi that he’d heard about recently, which was that the round, black-and-white “pieces” used to play the game were, in fact, officially referred to as “disks.”

“Huhhh? That’s like the most basic thing for this game, Kuroya! You seriously didn’t know that?”

He recalled the time when she’d first told him that information upon joining the after-school circle. She’d had a smug look on her face and with a teasing tone to her voice that’d left him feeling incredibly aggravated at the time.

“My point is that this game is designed to be nice and uncomplicated, especially when compared to all the other board games on the market. But guess what? I’m still having a blast playing it! How amazing is that?” she clarified.

“It definitely feels like one of those easy to learn, yet hard to master types of games, that’s for sure.”

“Mhmm! Oh, and it’s also a lot like Shogi or Go in terms of it being a... uhhh, a perfect so-and-so!”

"A ‘perfect information game,’ perhaps?” Soukichi asked.

“That’s the one! Look at you, using big words. Nice going.”

“It’s nothing impressive, really. All the edgy people used to say it all the time back in middle school.”

“Whoa, spoken like a true edgelord! Haha!” Kasumi quipped with a playful smile. It seemed to Kouichi that she was having a slight dig at him, but he wasn’t upset by it at all, for whatever reason.

Game theory as a whole contained multiple different categories, and a perfect information game was one of them. Putting things in grossly simple terms, it referred to a two-player game where no *possible* element of chance could influence the game in any way, and both players would always be well-informed about any events that transpired.

Examples of this style included Shogi, Go, Chess, and the game they were in the midst of right now, Reversi. Soukichi, however, did not know much about the concept and the term only stuck with him because it sounded “cool.”

“Anyway, I’m so glad you decided to join this club.” she said while she busied her hands with one of the white disks and became immersed in her reverie. “I’d probably just be reading books without you here. It’s good that I got myself a Reversi partner.”

“I highly doubt playing Reversi could even count as a club activity. Then again, we’re not exactly a proper club, per se,” Soukichi commented.

“Keep the snarky comments to yourself, smartypants! You’re cramping my style,” she clapped back.

“…”

“Man, you’re such a buzzkill, you know that?” she complained with a shrug of her shoulders. Soukichi had made a good point, though. They weren’t doing all this as members of a club centered entirely around Reversi in particular; actually, they weren’t technically a club in the first place.

The official name in the school committee’s records was the “Literature Circle,” and the clubroom was located in the school’s secondary building in the innermost section of the third floor. Judging from the lengthy table, the pipe chairs, the many, many books packed tightly into the bookshelves, and the number of club journals—which they assumed had been written by former members of the literature club—one could easily infer that the room had belonged to that club in the past.

The door plague dangling outside the door, left behind after the club had been disbanded years prior for not having enough members, was proof of that. Nowadays, it had been turned into the “Literature Circle,” a place where people could get all the enjoyment of reading novels without the pesky responsibilities that came with a normal club... at the cost of not having a club budget.

Kasumi had been the only other member when Soukichi had joined last year, and they remained the sole two members ever since. That wasn’t much of a bother, though, as club activities were quite laid back, ranging from reading and discussing books to playing board games like Reversi.

“By the way, I was meaning to ask you something, Kuroya.”

“What’s up?”

“It’s been a few months now since the semester began, so I was wondering if you’ve gotten settled down in your new class yet. Made any new friends?” she asked.

“Do I look like the people type to you?” he replied.

“Can’t say you do.”

“There you have it.”

“Hahaha! That’s the loner I know!” she exclaimed.

“Leave me alone. I just prefer being by myself, that’s all.”

Students worldwide all fell under two main camps: the social butterflies, and the sad loners. Soukichi, understandably, had been firmly placed in the latter by both his classmates' view of him, as well as his own. Soukichi himself, however, had never had a problem being labeled that way; he saw no reason to constantly be upbeat and sociable. He preferred the silence of the shade that more suited him to the unpleasant, bright sunlight that the other group basked in.

I'm not gonna go against who I am just to get along with people I know I won't gel with. I'd rather engross myself in a good book instead, he thought to himself. That was the kind of person Soukichi Kuroya always was.

"I won't deny the fact that I'm a loner, nor do I mind being called one either. But I would really appreciate it if you didn't peg me as one of those antisocials who's just secretly wanting to have more friends," he rambled. "I'm sure those people exist, but I'm not some amateur loner who insults extroverts out of jealousy. I'm more the type that likes being away from the spotlight because it suits my overall aesthetic and life philosophy better. It has nothing to do with which side is superior to me. It's more just a difference in values, and—"

"Whoa! Look out, folks! We got a Kuroya-core rant incoming!" she interrupted with her usual teasing.

"...I'll just stop talking," Soukichi said.

"Hahaha! C'mon, no need to get all sulky. I didn't mean it like that. Teasing you is just too much fun, Kuroya," she joked with a hearty laugh, pretty much contradicting what she said earlier about him not being the most entertaining of people.

Either way, as Soukichi took some curious looks at Kasumi, he appeared somewhat dejected. If he himself was a self-described "loner," then Kasumi would be a textbook example of the social butterfly archetype. She was always upbeat, friendly with just about anyone, had lots of friends, and, above all else, was both beautiful and elegant in appearance.

Kasumi and Soukichi represented opposite extremes of the social spectrum and would have never gotten involved with one another under normal circumstances. She stood on the top of the social pyramid of school, a normie extrovert wholeheartedly accepted by her fellow students.

We pretty much live in completely different worlds, he pondered. But by some unsavory stroke of luck, Soukichi had found himself in the same circle as her, he'd gotten to know more about her over time, and now a full year had passed since he joined.

We've always been together like this ever since my first year, he reminisced vaguely, though he made sure to keep his attention on the board

in front of him, which was dotted in black and white. The game had reached its final stages.

Kasumi Shiramori was a third-year student at Midoriba High School, making her Soukichi's senior by one year. She also happened to be the current president of the "Literature Circle."

She had thick, dark-brown hair, long, curved eyelashes, a dainty nose, and a pair of sensual lips. She was a fair maiden who exuded a gentle and collected aura. It was no real surprise, then, that she was a member of the fabled "Four Heavenly Beauties" of Midoriba High.

The "Four Heavenly Beauties" were a group of stunning girls in their third year of school that all boasted their own captivating looks. They also happened to be friends with one another, inevitably attracting onlookers whenever they were seen together. Perhaps that was the reason they were given that ridiculous nickname to begin with.

Kasumi in particular was also known throughout the school by the name "Cougar." It wasn't exactly the most normal name to give a high-school student, and nobody would fault someone for questioning the mental sanity of whoever thought it up. However, it also made sense in a way. Kasumi looked mature for her age, with her eyes and lips possessing a peculiar charm to them. She was tall, had a figure that would make a model jealous, and was also quite... well-endowed, to say the least.

For better or worse, Kasumi's features were more akin to that of an adult woman rather than your typical teenage girl, especially with how she radiated allure.

The nickname suits her to a tee, all things considered, Soukichi thought. Obviously, Kasumi wasn't exactly keen on it herself. But whatever the case, she was pretty much the equivalent of a school celebrity. Despite her glamorous nature, her modesty and social skills managed to win the admiration of everyone who came in contact with her, regardless of gender.

This might be really rude of me, but I never would've thought that someone as outgoing and sociable as her would have a hobby as mundane as reading, he murmured to himself as he realized that he had let stereotypes dictate his initial impression.

In any case, Kasumi did indeed fancy herself a bit of a bookworm. She enjoyed all sorts of novella: general literature, light novels, character-driven novels, and belles-lettres. She loved anything that came in a novel format, and it even extended as far as anime and manga at times. In other words, she was a big fan of fiction and especially stories.

I guess she's the type of person to cherish whatever free time she has to read as much as she likes hanging out with crowds of people, he mumbled to

himself. Nevertheless, it was nothing short of reasonable for her to join the "Literature Circle."

I'm more on the boring side. Reading is the only hobby of mine that I could think of, actually, but I wouldn't have met her if it wasn't for that, he continued while he looked down at his black disks that covered the majority of the board.

"Hmmm..." she groaned, practically staring holes into the uncheckered board in front of her. She folded her arms and began assessing her options, which only inadvertently accentuated her already-large bust.

Any other Chad or Brad would drop dead at this view, but not me. I'm built different. I got nerves of steel, he said, half trying to convince himself as he averted his eyes and tried speaking in the most poised tone he could muster, "It's over, Shiramori. You have no way to beat me now. I win."

The winner had been decided. There was still space on the board for Kasumi to make a move, but, unfortunately for her, all of her options would ultimately play right in Soukichi's hand. It was a complete and utter checkmate, to put it in Shogi terms.

"... Ugh! Fine! I'll give you this one, but the war is far from overrrrrr!" Kasumi yelled dramatically. She raised both of her arms in the air, before eventually planting her face down on the table.

She sure does act like a child sometimes for someone with her reputation and appearance, he thought. *I could sit and watch her reactions all day long and not get bored once.*

"Damn it! I'm this close to rage quitting this game entirely! Haah... Since when did you get so good at this? I remember when I used to rack up so many winning streaks against you..." she lamented.

"I mean, I *have* been playing with you for a year now," he answered. Go back a few months, and Soukichi couldn't buy a win. Kasumi was simply too skilled or, rather, it was Soukichi who wasn't familiar enough with the game. The only thing he remotely knew about it was that it was common wisdom to take the four corners.

That'd all changed once he entered the "Literature Circle," however. He started focusing on studying strategies related to the game due to how often he and Kasumi played it.

The more I looked into the game, the more I realized how complex it could really get, he pondered. Soukichi purchased strategy books that helped him to learn various tactics that he then put into practice on a free Reversi website. It wasn't long after that he came to the stunning realization that Reversi was a game of smothering the opponent rather than concentrating solely on one's own maneuvers.

I feel like I have a whole new perspective after figuring that out, he continued.

"No fair, Kuroya! I bet you've been training hard behind my back!" she objected.

"At least be graceful in defeat. Don't be such a sore loser."

"So that's how it's gonna be, huh? Aight, Time for my offscreen training montage! My dignity as the Literature Circle Rep is at stake!" she claimed.

"I didn't know that our skills at Reversi were how we save face here."

"Appreciate the sarcasm. This club's just the two of us, anyways. Let me have my fun," she said. She straightened her posture, leaned back against the chair, and stuck out her chest. The point of interest was, again, her larger-than-average breasts.

How the hell do those massive milkers keep managing to draw attention to themselves every time she changes her posture? he asked himself quite the sensible question.

"No new members this year, either..." she grumbled.

"We haven't exactly been putting our name out there," he argued. It would appear that reading literature wasn't exactly high on the list of things that teenagers wanted to do in their free time. Because of that fact, the amount of people who'd be willing to join this—barely active, mind you—Literature Circle dwindled considerably.

"As depressing as it may be, it looks like it'll be another year of just us two, Kuroya."

"I wouldn't have it any other way, personally," his tongue slipped.

"Huh?"

"Umm, I mean..."

"Hmm? What was that? Did I hear that right?" she asked, her brief surprised expression shifting into a broad grin. "Did I? You know, I think I might've. So you're telling me that getting to spend more time *alone* with me makes you happy?"

"It's not that. Talking with newcomers is just such a pain. I'm a socially awkward loner, remember? I don't exactly enjoy making new friends," he coldly replied to her prodding.

"Wow, someone's a bonehead," she pouted under her breath, stood up from her chair, and made her way over to Soukichi's side of the table. She leaned toward him ever so slightly and looked him directly in the eyes. "Say, Kuroya. Want a reward for winning?"

"What?"

"I said, do you want a reward for beating your senior?" she repeated.

"Nah, I think I'm good. Not like we made a bet before the start of the game or anything. Besides, this isn't even my first victory against you."

“Quit being such a wet blanket. I’ve already made up my mind, anyways. Is there anything in particular that you want? I’ll listen to any request you have. Nothing is off the table!” she insisted as her face got awfully close to Soukichi’s, enough for him to be enchanted by the mysterious glisten contained within her beguiling eyes. Her stare was so intense that Soukichi instinctively had to look away.

“Is there something, anything you wanna request of me, Kuroya?” Kasumi continued.

“Nope, not even a little. What’s gotten into you all of a sudden?” he inquired and was met with a rather unamused expression from her.

“Haaah, I can’t believe you,” an exaggerated sigh soon followed. “You know what? If you really wanna be such a goose, you leave me no choice.”

“Huh...?” he responded in confusion. *Seriously, what is up with her today? She's acting a little weirder than usual. I can’t read what she’s thinking normally, but today, something is clearly off...*

Kasumi ignored his clear bewilderment and plopped herself down in the chair adjacent to Soukichi this time around. The distance between the two had now diminished significantly.

“Say, Kuroya,” she began, her chin nestled in the palm of her hand, and a mischievous smirk on her face. She would then utter the words that would bring a massive change to their relationship. “You like me, don’t you?”

It was so far out of left field that it felt as though time had stopped for Soukichi. His heartbeat was the only thing beating like mad in the middle of it all. Kasumi was having the time of her life on the other hand, as evident by her twisted smile.

Her cheeks were tinted in a dash of scarlet, but Soukichi was willing to bet that his face was likely at least; aggravated by the sensation of boiling blood rushing towards his temple.

“Wh-Wha...? I...” he stumbled.

“You do like me, right?” she asked.

“Err...”

“Right?” she continued to press him for an answer as she maintained firm eye contact.

I still have a way out of this. I just have to play my cards right, he thought to himself. Unfortunately, his attempt to dodge the matter would fail miserably following the next few words to come out of his mouth, “How did you... figure it out?”

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The lethal combination of surprise and disarray had done a number on Soukichi's morale, leading him to panic just enough for him to make that one costly mistake. He'd ended up blurting out what he was really thinking without resistance.

"Oh? So I was right on the money with that one, then," she snickered in satisfaction. Her elated smile caused Soukichi to feel even more embarrassed, albeit to his dismay.

"No, that's not—"

"Thank goodness I wasn't overthinking it! Would've been pretty embarrassing if it was all just a misunderstanding on my part," she interrupted.

"I'm telling you, that's not the case..."

"Lies, I know you like me. Loads and loads!" she taunted while poking his cheek with her finger. "Take that, and that!"

"C-Cut it out!"

"Hahaha, not a chance! Look at your face all red," she teased. Soukichi quickly got up from his chair in a frenzy to put as much distance between him and her as possible. Things weren't looking up for poor Soukichi, as that whole display provoked more laughter from Kasumi.

God damn it! I always end up as the butt of her jokes somehow, he complained to himself. *She's always so annoying, has basically no consideration for others, has no qualms about invading others' personal space, and is way too touchy-feely... But then you realize that she's actually pretty modest, surprisingly good at taking a hint, super kind for the most part, and... she's cute, has a fantastic body... she's the perfect woman for me... ah*

It didn't take long for Soukichi to realize that he'd just been praising her to the high heavens under his breath, leaving him feeling more vexed than before.

Shit! I can't. I just can't. There's no way I can lie my way out of this, he continued. It was true—Soukichi Kuroya had fallen for Kasumi ever since the first time he'd laid eyes on her and the year they had spent together only cemented his fondness for her.

Soukichi was madly in love with Kasumi, and it wasn't just your ordinary kind of affection either. His was comparable to a helpless soul that sank further and further into a bottomless swamp the more it struggled to escape. Naturally, he didn't so much as dream that he would ever get a chance to go out with her. She was way out of his league, or so he kept telling himself.

A loner like me could never date a girl as popular and outgoing as her, he mulled. *She's always been nice to me, but I suppose that's just how she is*

toward everyone, he continued, stressing his intention to not mistake Kasumi's kindness for anything more.

Still, it never stopped his imagination from running rampant, from holding onto the illusion that he had the slightest chance with her. He even started practicing how he would confess, even though he'd never had the courage to convey his feelings directly.

I'm fine with just being around her, he thought. *That's why I tried my best not to expose my true feelings, but now...*

"Heh-heh-heh. That's how you really feel about me, hmm? I always knew you had a thing for me, Kuroya," she cooed in a delighted voice; all the while Soukichi was close to dying of humiliation. "Well, well, well... What should I do with this juicy information?" she questioned with a beaming grin, shooting an analyzing stare at him.

Soukichi had already resigned himself to his fate. The jig was up; his crush knew about the feelings he held for her. It was as good as a death sentence for a self-respecting loner like him, and he felt powerless as a result. Kasumi was all but literally holding a sword to his throat, with his life now in the palm of her hand.

"H-How much money will it take to keep this between us?" he tried to compromise now that his biggest secret was out in the open.

"Don't be a drama queen," she answered.

"J-Just don't tell anyone about this! I beg you! Especially Shiramori..."

"But I am Shiramori," she commented.

Oh yeah. That's right. The worst possible outcome has already happened, he thought.

"Pfft, hahaha! You went full bananas there, Kuroya!" she joked, unable to contain her laughter. "Don't worry, silly. I won't tell anyone that you have the hots for me. I'll stop with the teasing, as well."

"..."

"Unless... you think of me as a heartless bully? Tell me, Kuroya, is that how you see the girl of your dreams?"

"Ugh! Literally a moment later, and you're already poking fun at me!" he protested.

"Haha, come on. That's fair game."

Damn it! She's making a joke out of all this! Even though I'm serious about—his thoughts were interrupted.

"Hey, Kuroya," she uttered as she stood up from her chair and, before Soukichi even knew what was happening, closed the distance between them altogether. Soukichi kept retreating backwards—at least, until he had backed himself up against the wall. He had nowhere to run. "You have a thing for me, right?"

“I...” he faltered. To be fair, who wouldn’t when faced by that pair of beautiful eyes, those luscious lips, pristine skin, and sweet scent. Everything about her was attractive to the point of torture, and Soukichi understood that there was no bluffing his way out of this—not with someone as adorable and gorgeous as Kasumi standing this close up to him.

“I… I do like you,” he finally responded. Kasumi had successfully dragged an answer out of him.

“Hmm, I see,” she nodded to herself. What came next was such an outrageous proposal that it took the jumbled mess that was Soukichi’s mind and turned it completely upside down, causing him further confusion.

“So... do you wanna try going out with me?” she proposed. Soukichi was in disbelief and found himself questioning if he’d heard her correctly.

“Wait... Huh? What?” he wavered. *Me? Going out? With her?*

“Did you not catch that? I was asking if you wanted to give dating a shot,” she reiterated with her usual smile, albeit this time a little more bashful. “You know how it is. I don’t exactly *dislike* you or anything, and it obviously makes me really happy to hear that my adorable little junior has a crush on me.”

“...”

Soukichi didn’t say anything in response, but he was comforted by her words. He’d figured she would get furious with him for misreading her goodwill as something else entirely. He’d even anticipated a verbal tongue-lashing while she was at it, disparaging him with comments such as “you’re disgusting” and “how self-conceited can you be?” Luckily for him, that wasn't the case at all.

I guess that means she accepted my confession! Well, it’d be a stretch to call that a confession, but she accepted my feelings in the end! he thought.

“So what’s your answer?” she inquired.

“Wh-What exactly does “try” going out mean here?” he asked.

“As in we can have a sort of trial couple period. Don’t think too hard about it. Let’s just try dating for a little bit and see what happens.”

“...”

Soukichi was at a loss for words once again, and justifiably so. He had been exposed to one shocking revelation after another, and his brain simply couldn’t keep up.

Is this real? I’ll get to be with my dream girl? Make her my first girlfriend?! Still, I’m not sure how I feel about all that ‘trial’ business she was talking about... Maybe all extroverts are pretty chill when it comes to this sort of thing, he pondered.

“Oh, and by the way, you only have 10 seconds to give me your response,” she suddenly proclaimed with a triumphant smile. That was the

final blow for Soukichi's already-shot nerves. She was clearly having fun toying with him at this point.

"J-Just 10?!" he cried.

"You heard me. If you don't answer with a 'Yes' in the next 10 seconds, the deal is off the table."

"WHAT?! H-Hold on just a moment!"

"No way, Jose. Alrighty, oneee, twooo, three—"

"O-Of course! I wanna go out with you!" he screamed out of sheer panic, completely disregarding the fact that Kasumi had just started her countdown. He could practically hear the angry shouts of a coach urging his floored boxer to at least take a rest on the floor until the count reached eight.

"P-Please let me go out with you! I don't care if it's a trial or whatever! Just being with you is enough!" he pleaded. His brains had turned into mush by now, and what he'd blurted out—as much of a knee-jerk reaction as it was—was the first confession in his 16 years on Earth.

It was worlds apart from what he'd so meticulously prepared ahead of time. He stuttered a lot and was quite flustered the entire way through, and the confession itself hadn't had the slightest iota of refinement or polish. Saying it was a disaster of a confession would be understating it. However...

"Mhmm, good boy," she responded. Kasumi didn't look to mind it in the slightest. If anything, she appeared overjoyed; her smile even indicated her relief at his answer, in a way. "I'm looking forward to it, Kuroya."

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Thus, Soukichi had gotten himself his first ever girlfriend, it being none other than his dazzling senior he'd been infatuated with for what felt like forever. His love was a requited one, and while their relationship was as of yet in its trial phase, they were now lovers.

Looking at it from a results point of view, it couldn't have gone any better. Still, the process he went through to get said result was... rather hectic, to say the least.

Shiramori saw right through me and ended up being the one who proposed we start dating to begin with. And there I was, going with the flow of what she said, even when it felt a little overbearing, he reflected. Soukichi felt ashamed of himself at how everything had panned out.

To make matters worse, he couldn't bring himself to feel elated about coming out victorious in the psychological game known as "love."

The stats everyone starts with are unfair and detrimental, and the rules are vague at best. You aren't afforded the convenience of 'routes' like in dating sims. Say you did pick the correct choices. You're still never guaranteed

to end up with anyone, he thought. *Hell, you don't even know if there's a heroine out there specifically for you. And there isn't a shortage of people discovering that their heroine never existed to begin with!*

In reality, there existed one common decisive factor in the form of universal winning conditions in the trash game people refer to as "love." That was: being considered a winner if one's crush accepted their confession, and a loser if they rejected their advances.

I assumed those winning conditions were absolute, but—those infallible rules had begun to waver. Soukichi never thought, or even had it cross his mind, that he'd be so tormented by a feeling of defeat. Not when he had finally beat the game and got the girl he'd always loved.

It doesn't even feel like I've won... I feel more like a loser than anything, he thought. And so their relationship—which had been founded off the back of Soukichi's loss—was finally underway.

Chapter One

The Start of a Rigged Game

"Normie": it was a word that referred to those who were more outgoing and lived their lives to the fullest, and it was a word that Soukichi had always disliked. He hadn't the foggiest about where it originated, but that didn't change the disdain he held for it. Having said that, his hatred didn't stem from jealousy or contempt toward people like that, as opposed to others who would criticize that particular lifestyle in certain circles.

I've just never been a fan of the word, he thought to himself. The reason for that was it couldn't be accurately interpreted. People would argue that it described individuals who enjoyed a fulfilled life. But that then bears the question: what exactly embodied fulfillment, and how could one achieve it in life? The answer would be quite simple: it all depended whoever you asked.

Similar to how each individual had their own definition of what they'd consider "happiness" or "success," it was fair to assume that the same logic extended to the word "Normie."

However, the universal image that came to mind whenever the term was mentioned would be people who had lots of friends, a healthy love life, frequented barbeque parties, skiing trips, social events, and, finally, had an impressive following on social media. And those who dared to deviate from the norm would be mocked and labeled as "Outcasts."

Sadly, this wasn't all just an extremely belated April Fools joke. One would arbitrarily be told they " weren't living a fulfilling life" if they, God forbid, didn't have a lover or even had a less-than-average number of friends. Ironically enough, activities such as reading manga or books, watching movies or anime, and enjoying video games or online videos were all just as undeniably "fulfilling" to certain people.

Calling people "Outcasts" based on factors such as their more indoor-centered hobbies and their number of friends or lack of significant other was about as narrow-minded as claiming the only happiness ever intended for a woman is for her to find a good husband, start a family, give birth, and raise her children in Soukichi's opinion.

The term, and its implication of what a person's happiness should look like, was unfit for a modern era that had put emphasis on respecting different opinions. One could say that it was an mallicious colloquialism that was created by those fueled by bigoted and obsolete values, alongside social pressure that aimed to exclude any and all people who deviated from the norm.

The words describing people's behavior like "sociable" or "loner" differed greatly in that regard. While Soukichi wasn't the most pleased about it, the fact was they both had distinct meanings that were more pronounced and consistent when compared to "Normie" and "Outcast."

An outgoing person was called sociable, and someone who preferred being left alone was deemed a loner. These terms clearly got across the difference between the two in the ears of the listener, and neither came across as biased toward one or the other. Society of course, placed the more sociable person on a pedestal, but the point still stood: "Normie" and "Outcast" were much more discriminatory and derisive overall.

Soukichi couldn't bear having strangers arbitrarily decide on whether or not his life was "fulfilling", but he was still fine with being known as a loner. That was his true disposition, after all.

"—I can't believe someone who used to go on obnoxious rants like that is now himself a normie. And you got yourself a girlfriend, too? Life truly is stranger than fiction," mocked Tokiya, a friend of Soukichi.

"Just shut up," a defeated Soukichi replied while slurping on his udon.

It was the day after Soukichi had entered his first relationship, and it was currently lunch break. He and his friend sat facing one another at a table in the corner of the second-floor cafeteria which was incredibly crowded today.

"I was already pretty surprised that an edgelord like you nabbed yourself one, but when you dropped the bomb about it being one of the "Four Heavenly Beauties" I was like, 'Man, my guy hit the jackpot," Tokiya awed as he stuffed his mouth with Katsudon. "I'm legit jealous. Shiramori's pretty, tall, and has big tits on top of that. Damn, I wish I were you right now."

"Bro," Soukichi cut him off with a murderous stare.

"Haha, just messin' with you, bud. I'm not so desperate that I'd lay a hand on my friend's first ever girlfriend, you feel me?" Tokiya laughed, not the tiniest bit affected by Soukichi's hostility.

Tokiya Shimokura was a high-school student in the same year as Soukichi who was also a friend of his since middle school. He had a tendency of being quite picky when it came to making friends, and Tokiya was one of that very select group. They'd been assigned to different classes this year, and since Soukichi hadn't gotten around to making any friends in his new class, Tokiya was still the only friend who had lunch with him like this.

Tokiya had piercing eyes, like those of an untamed wolf, and an arrogant smile to match. He was tall in stature, muscular, and had a general wild aura around him. And although he might look intimidating due to his height and usual serious expression, he was nevertheless quite attractive. One would

naturally assume that he was another sociable normie who stood at the top of the social pyramid of the school, but that couldn't be further from the truth; Tokiya had absolutely no interest in school or its social hierarchy to begin with.

He'd made a habit of skipping classes from his time in middle school onward, with the only commitment in his life being to going to concerts and hip-hop circles. He was also the kind of guy to always go after high-school girls back then. And now that he was in high school, he spent his free time messing around with adult women and university chicks. He had an outgoing personality for sure, though he tended to be more interested in the community *outside* of school.

Of course, Tokiya's nature had garnered him a less-than-stellar relationship with his classmates, and while Soukichi was his exact polar opposite with his bland, loner personality, they were both still forced to partner up a lot in PE class or integrative learning periods as an ostracized duo. They'd been good friends ever since.

"You really love Shiramori, huh? You're so hot for her it's making *me* blush," Tokiya added.

"I wouldn't go that far! I just... like her... a lot," Soukichi faltered.

"Uh-uh. Well, I'm convinced. How could I not be by that extremely red face of yours?" Tokiya bantered. He was well aware that Soukichi was head-over-heels for Kasumi, not because Soukichi told him or came to him for advice, but because Tokiya had figured it out from the natural flow of their conversations. "Anywho, things worked themselves out in the end. I'm a bit disappointed that you went ahead and confessed without talking to me about it first, but hey. I'll give you a free pass since you ended up getting the girl."

"Huh?"

"But yeah, I guess even for smartass, killjoy, pretentious snobs, all it takes is a bit of courage to confess. I'm proud of you, pal," Tokiya praised Soukichi, overcome with emotion.

"It's not that... Just chill for a second," Soukichi quelled his friend in a frenzy. "I haven't even confessed to her yet."

"You... haven't?" Tokiya questioned.

"You heard it right."

"No freakin' way. Wait, don't tell me that *she* was the one who did it?"

"Nah, it's not that either. It's, umm, sorta hard to explain in all honesty," Soukichi said, then proceeded to explain the events that'd transpired yesterday. About how Kasumi figured out that he had feelings for her, asked him if he wanted to give being a trial couple a shot, and finally, how he accepted her offer.

“What the actual HELL, man?!” Tokiya shot a dumbfounded gaze at Soukichi, his heaps of compliments from a moment ago now nowhere to be found. “Soukichi, my guy, you cannot be this much of a beta. It basically sounds like she’s going out with you out of pity at this point.”

“Shut up, dude!”

“A good first impression is the name of the game, man. If you keep being such a wuss, she’s gonna be the one with the pants in the relationship.”

“Duly noted. Now can it,” Soukichi heaved a sigh and rested his head on his hand. “I know I was pretty lame back there, okay?” he continued. Just remembering what happened yesterday made him want to jump in a hole and die. *Why did it all have to pan out like that? It could’ve gone so much better...*

“Is she screwing with me...?” Soukichi expressed his unease. “Like, the moment I first try acting like her boyfriend, she’ll laugh at me and shout, ‘Smile, you’re on Candid Camera.’”

“It’s a possibility. You’ll find terrible excuses for human beings with nothing else going on in their lives toying around with people’s feelings everywhere in life,” Tokiya explained. “Do you really think Shiramori is that type of woman?”

“No...” Soukichi answered hesitantly. He didn’t think she’d do that to him or, rather, wanted to believe that she wouldn't. *She does make fun of me a lot, and she sometimes does cross the line, but I’m confident that she would never trample all over people’s feelings for kicks.*

“Guess you have no choice but to believe in the girl you fell for, then,” Tokiya teased, shrugging his shoulders. “You guys might’ve agreed on being a ‘trial couple’ or whatever, but I guarantee that she wouldn’t bring it up in the first place if she didn’t at least somewhat like you. Who knows? Maybe she’s fallen for you too?”

“I’m not sure,” Soukichi responded. He couldn’t have possibly known the answer to that question. There wasn’t a single person in the world who wanted to know more than he did, after all. *How does she feel about me...?*

“I can’t in good conscience believe that she actually has a thing for me. She’s gorgeous and popular. Meanwhile, I’m just some random guy with no special talents to speak of. I can’t think of a single reason why she’d be into me,” Soukichi added.

“Yeah, true, but consider this: you’ve been with her in that circle of yours for a whole year, yeah? I bet that all of those obvious hints about how you’ve felt about has made her see you in that way.”

“I didn’t, though,” Soukichi objected.

“I totally buy that. How did she catch on, then?” Tokiya asked sarcastically.

"Umm..."

"I'll tell you how it went. It's not uncommon for a girl to suddenly start thinking about you more once she knows you're interested in her. She'll even start treating someone as dull as you as a potential love interest," Tokiya explained.

I think I know what he's getting at, Soukichi thought. *Any girl would probably be on my mind a lot if I knew she liked me... Not like I have any experience on the matter,* he silently agreed with Tokiya—that was when his friend touched upon a thorny subject.

"Besides, I don't wanna hear any of that 'I have no special talents' nonsense. Don't sell yourself short, man. You used to be a pro wri— Oh..." Tokiya didn't finish his sentence.

"..."

"...My bad. I shouldn't have said that," he followed up with an apology.

"It's okay," Soukichi reassured him. To him, it seemed more like a slip of the tongue on Tokiya's part, judging from the sincerity in his voice and the regret on his face when he apologized. Therefore, Soukichi saw no reason to hold it against him. "I'm not traumatized by it anymore. No need to walk on eggshells around me about it."

Soukichi might have had a completely different reaction to the matter if he was still in his third year of middle school. He could easily see himself hyperventilating just from hearing those words; maybe he'd have even curled on the floor while holding his head or clutching his chest.

I'm over that now, he told himself. *I'm finally able to move forward. I mean, I do sometimes look back, and feel discouraged, but I'm more forward-facing these days.*

"Hmm. If you say so, man. I was, just so you know. I honestly couldn't bear looking at you like that back then," Tokiya confessed with a grim expression. "You were absent from school for the majority of our third year because of what happened. Hell, you looked totally dead inside back at the entrance ceremony, remember? I was seriously worried about you, man. I genuinely felt that you were gonna pack your things and quit school altogether."

"..."

"But hey, look atcha now. Enjoying life, spirits at an all time high just because things are going well with your hot senior. Damn, bro, you had me sweatin' for nothin'," Tokiya continued.

"You honestly think I'm the type to move on that quickly?" Soukichi inquired.

"Ye. It's pretty simple. You were feeling down because some bad shit happened, and now you're having the time of your life because you're getting it on with the girl you love."

"..."

Soukichi felt frustrated at himself for not being able to respond to his friend. Tokiya had made a couple of points which Soukichi found difficult to approve of, but none of what he said was necessarily false.

Soukichi was indeed in a deep depression back in middle school because of a certain incident. He became fed up with everything and had serious thoughts about quitting the high school he had to settle for because he couldn't get into his first choice school. Then fast forward one year, and Soukichi had maintained a perfect attendance record.

Something's not adding up. It's like he's saying I only got back on my feet because I had a crush on someone, Soukichi pondered. *Or maybe I just wasn't as down as I thought I was... Ugh, I dunno. That doesn't quite feel right either. It all sounds pretty basic on the surface, but there was a lot of convoluted drama involved. Like what happened at last year's cultural festival—*

"Oh, hey Speak of the devil Look who showed up," Tokiya interrupted Soukichi's musings as he pointed at the entrance of the cafeteria. where two attractive third-year girls were standing.

"Wait, aren't those two part of the 'Four Heavenly Beauties'?"'

"Whoa, you're right. It's the 'Tanned Gal' and the 'Cougar.'"

"They look amazing!"

"First time I've seen them..."

Those were a few of the audible comments that stood out amidst the ruckus caused by the first-year students in the cafeteria. Chances were that they all got really excited at having finally bore witness to the most well-known beauties in the school. On the other hand, the beauties in question didn't pay any heed to the envious stares cast at them and casually bought themselves a meal ticket before standing in line at the counter.

Ann Ukyou, one of the "Four Heavenly Beauties," who had the apt nickname of the "Tanned Gal" due to her dark skin, dazzlingly blonde hair, and Gal fashion style. Her make-up was always impeccable, and it was common for her to wear her uniform in a less-than-formal manner.

All things considered, the high school Soukichi went to was meant to prepare students for college, but it was still famous for having less strict rules than most places. An example of this was the fact that students wouldn't get into trouble if they dyed their hair or didn't wear their uniform properly—that is, as long as they kept it within reason.

The freedom students have here has been the school's main selling point, and that's made it really popular throughout the whole prefecture, Soukichi

thought. *Honestly, this isn't the kind of a school suited to a loner like me. It also wasn't even my first choice to begin with, but I digress.*

Because of the school's lenient regulations, students were allowed to dress more boldly, like Ann with her Gal fashion, without risk of any disciplinary action.

Next to the "Tanned Gal" stood one of her close friends. She was also a member of the "Four Heavenly Beauties," and she too had a nickname: "The Cougar". It was none other than Kasumi Shiramori. While both of them were beautiful in their own right, each had rather distinctive personalities. One was a full-on Gal, and the other had a gentle, more composed aura about her.

"Seriously, Kasumi. Like, you forgetting your lunch box? That's totally cray-cray," Ann said in a firm, loud voice which Soukichi could hear even with a fair distance between them.

"I slept in until pretty late today, which meant I had no time to make one," Kasumi replied.

"Up late reading those big-brain books of yours again?" Ann asked.

"Hmm, something like that. It's a good change of pace, anyways. It means that I get to have lunch with my bestie~"

"Ahaha, aintcha' just the cutest thing. How 'bout we celebrate by buying me a meal?"

"Hahaha. Nice try, but nooo thank you!" Kasumi exclaimed. They were both clearly enjoying each other's company, and anyone listening could easily tell that they were close friends.

I dunno why, but seeing them flirt with each other makes me... happy for some reason, Soukichi contemplated, remaining lost in thought until he made eye-contact with Kasumi. "Ah."

Kasumi cracked a smile and waved at Soukichi. This wasn't anything out of the ordinary; she had always done so whenever she saw him around school. It only made Soukichi anxious about how other students would think of Kasumi if she got along with someone as plain and boring as him. However, she herself was never concerned about those details and interacted with him as she normally would, whether there were people around or not.

Kasumi was being her usual self. Soukichi, on the contrary...

"Soukichi, bro, what're you doing?" Tokiya asked.

"I-I'll explain later! For now, just hide me!" Soukichi pleaded.

"From what exactly?" Tokiya followed up.

Soukichi quickly concealed himself behind Tokiya's large frame without really knowing why. He, for the life of him, couldn't bear looking at her. Each time the realization of Kasumi being his girlfriend hit him, it

overwhelmed him with emotion and made his mind go blank, and the worst of it all was that he couldn't do anything about it.

"Damn, man, look at Shiramori playing it off like she's swatting away a fly. Smooth," Tokiya said.

Oh, guess I ended up troubling her more than anything... What the hell am I saying?! Of course I did! I literally just ignored her and hid behind my friend when she waved at me! Jesus, what am I doing? How does it always end up like this? Soukichi mulled.

"Hahaha! Future not looking the brightest, huh?" Tokiya sneered as he nudged Soukichi with his elbow from behind.

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Soukichi had imagined dating to be something marvelous and dreamlike. He'd also had the impression that it would be full of dramatic moments at times, like what one would see in TV shows or soap operas, while being incredibly satisfying in equal parts.

To cite an example, one of the goals for any rom-com would be for the main two characters to finally get together and go on dates. However, that was one of the many endings that the genre could take.

For your standard romcom, the typical course of events was the protagonist meeting the heroine and them slowly growing closer to each other after several happenstances before finally getting together, Soukichi pondered. Dating was supposed to be the ultimate climax of the story, and so he thought that getting a girlfriend would be a life-changing event for him.

Reality proved otherwise, however. There wasn't a touching confession, or any sort of thrilling drama leading up to it, for that matter. His relationship with Kasumi had begun without any pomp and circumstance, and it had happened so instantaneously that it had rendered both Soukichi's heart and mind unable to keep up. He had absolutely no clue on how to deal with it all.

"Ah, there you are," Kasumi greeted him. Classes had ended for the day, and she was already in the clubroom by the time Soukichi opened the door. She closed the book she was reading, stood up from her chair, and walked up to him. "I really thought you weren't gonna show up. You know, because of you ignoring me earlier."

Geh! She must still be holding a grudge over what I did at lunch, he thought to himself.

"I looked pretty silly back there, you know? Smiling and waving at the wall because a certain someone decided to hide from me," she said.

"..."

“Haah, you must really hate me for doing something like that,” she added.

“I-It’s not that! I just...”

“Just what?” she pounced on him, her face now quite close to his. “I’m all ears.”

“It’s nothing... I’m sorry.”

“I wasn’t looking for an apology. I’m just more confused about why you did that in the first place,” she explained to him in a cheerful voice, which couldn’t exactly be said about Soukichi and his continued silence.

“Were you... embarrassed, by any chance?” she asked, having figured out the answer all on her own. “Maybe something along the lines of being so strung up that you couldn’t look your *girlfriend* in the face, hmm?”

“...Ugh,” he groaned. Kasumi had been dead on with her assumption. Still, Soukichi’s pride didn’t let him acknowledge that fact. “No, that wasn’t it. That was just me trying to be considerate to everyone around us. The riff-raff might catch on to our relationship if someone as popular as you got too friendly with a loner like me.”

“The riff-raff? That’s a funny way of putting it. I see you’re being as paranoid as usual. Nobody actually cares about what we or other people do, you know.”

“I might be paranoid, but I still feel you’re way too relaxed about everything,” he clarified. *I’m pretty confident nobody cares at all about what I do, but you’re different, Shiramori. You have heaps of guys looking to get with you.*

“Huh. Anyways, I’m just gonna chalk it up to you being embarrassed.”

“I-I just told you that wasn’t the case! Don’t go twisting the facts to suit your theory!” he objected.

“Whatever you say,” she smoothly brushed off his excuse before returning back to her chair.

I feel tired now for whatever reason, he murmured to himself. *I was pretty sure I’d gotten used to all of her teasing by now, but then she had to bring up this ‘trial’ couple thing. It feels like all of my exp and resilience had been reset back to level one. I’m honestly ashamed.*

Haah, I’m so pathetic, he let out a deep sigh before sitting in his own chair—specifically, the one diagonal to her, rather than his usual chair facing Kasumi.

“Ahem,” she cleared her throat and furrowed her brow as she rose from her chair to sit in the one opposite of Soukichi.

“Ugh,” he grumbled, standing up from his seat in lieu of another. However, Kasumi followed suit to sit in front of him once more. This happened three more times before Soukichi had finally had enough. “Wh-What are you following me for?!”

“Because you keep trying to run away from me. Why don’t you wanna sit facing me?”

“I just don’t feel like it today. I can sit wherever I want, anyway.”

“Okay then, same goes for me. It’s a free country, after all,” she argued, repeating the skit another three times. “...Pfftt, hahaha!” she then finally burst into laughter.

What’s so funny about this? I’m fighting for my life over here, he thought.

“This seriously takes me back. Do you remember what happened a year ago When you steadfastly refused to sit opposite of me after we’d just met,” she reminisced.

“I, umm,” he stuttered, because he knew exactly what she was referring to. Soukichi had spent a good while having some sort of complex about sitting facing Kasumi back when he first entered the circle. There was a reason behind his behavior; albeit not a very compelling one: he was just shy. *I’ve always been the type to avoid sitting in front of someone on a four-seat table to begin with, but when that someone is a stunningly attractive girl?? At that point, it just ramps up to impossible difficulty.*

“Hey, Kuroya. I dunno if you noticed, but...” she began in a nostalgic tone, leaving her seat to head toward the bookshelf, where she pulled out the Reversi set from the bottom shelf. “There was actually a reason why I suggested we play Reversi together.”

“Really?” he questioned. It had only been about two weeks into Soukichi’s stint as a member of the circle when Kasumi brought her Reversi set from home and invited him to play it with her. And the amount of times they’d matched up in the game had increased ever since. “Was it because you’re so good at the game and wanted to one-up me?”

“Hmm. So that’s your take on it. I see.”

“Err, well...”

“Can’t say you’re wrong, though”

I knew it! he thought. *Wait, then why’d she have that depressed look for a moment there?? Man, I ended up feeling guilty over nothing!*

“I do like Reversi a lot, that’s true. I also really did want you to play it with me. But the truth is that—” she paused, putting the green board the disks stoked on each side on the table. “—I just wanted you to sit in front of me and look me in the eyes.”

“Is that really all it was?” he asked.

“Yup. You need to sit in front of someone if you’re playing a board game. Worked like a charm, if I do say so myself,” she laid out the facts in a playful voice.

“So you finally decided to look at me.”

Kasumi's words of a year ago swirled about in his mind. He recalled how he was forced into sitting opposite of her after he couldn't turn down a game of Reversi. She had grown tired of waiting by then and uttered those words which Soukichi hadn't quite comprehended at the time. It had taken him one whole year to finally understand what she meant.

"How about a game of Reversi for ol' times sake?" she proposed while placing four disks in the center of the board. Now that everything had been set up, Soukichi had no choice but to play. So he gave in and reluctantly sat in the chair across from Kasumi.

Soukichi raised his head in a crude motion, only to find Kasumi staring at him with her chin resting on the palm of her hands, joy written all over her face. She was waiting for him to look her way all this time.

"Hehe, heya! So what do you think now that you're looking directly at me? Like the view?" she asked.

Damn it all! Why does she have to be so goddamn adorable?! he muttered to himself. "Let's just start the game."

"Okie-dokie," she answered back.

They then decided who'd go first through a game of rock-paper-scissors. Soukichi came out the winner, which meant he got to make the first move, and so he placed a black disk down to kick off proceedings. According to the official rules, the player with the black disks always got to start the game. Kasumi and Soukichi did things differently, however; they'd made an unspoken rule of picking the disk color that corresponded to their names. *Kuro*ya played with the black disks, and *Shira*mori played with the white ones.

"Say, Kuroya," she said, performing her first move. "Does going out with me get you all flustered?"

"Wha—"

"Does it make you blush?"

"Ugh!"

"Nervous, maybe?"

"I-I have not the slightest clue what you're talking about! Wh-Why would I be...?"

"Because you've been acting pretty suspicious," she claimed. She wasn't taken aback by Soukichi's recent odd behavior, but rather genuinely curious about it.

"It's just... It's just that for a loner like me, having a girlfriend is such an impactful event. All of the beliefs I stood for until now have been turned completely upside down."

Soukichi intended to live his life abiding by the philosophy of being a loner and all the aesthetics that came with it, while also not being jealous of

or criticizing social butterflies. All he wanted was peace, quiet, and indifference from everyone around him. Yet he felt that lifestyle and all his values had now come crashing down courtesy of the highly illogical game known as "Love."

"Hmm, I see," she commented.

"You don't look particularly fazed by it," he pointed.

"Huh? Of course I am. Even I get nervous sometimes... as well as embarrassed."

Do you now? That's not what I'm seeing, he thought. *She's been acting like how she normally would, but what's different is that it feels like she's enjoying poking fun at me a little too much. It's like I'm the only one that's panicking all the time, and that kinda makes me feel empty inside.*

"Sh-Shiramori!" he exclaimed after having strengthened his resolve. "Wh-Why did you choose to go out with me?" he got to the heart of the matter.

"What do you mean?"

"Y-You know! I can assume that you did it because you... you like me too, right?" he continued, summoning all his courage. However, seeing as that question was a product of angst and fear, it was more the complete opposite of courage he had conjured up. *God, that was lame. What the hell am I on about?! When a guy asks his girlfriend if she truly likes him, it just shows how anxious and insecure he is! Could I be more pathetic if I tried?*

"Hmmmm," she pondered as she stroked her chin with one hand, seemingly on purpose in order to make Soukichi's heart race even faster. And after some deep consideration, "I ain't telling!" she exclaimed with a mischievous smile.

"Wha—?! But... why?"

Because..." she paused briefly while drawing out what she was saying. "You're really cute when you get flustered."

...Huh?! God dammit! Why does she always do this to me?! he complained under his breath.

"Hahaha! Oh, how about we make this game interesting?" she offered as she looked down at the board. The game was still in its early stages, with both of them having made only three moves thus far. "I'll tell you how I really feel about you if you manage to beat me."

"F-For real?"

"Mhmm, for real."

"Alright then," he said and began fully immersing himself in the game at hand. The match which he absolutely could not lose had just begun.

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“Yaaay! I win!” she celebrated.

“Shit,” he cursed. *I put my all into it, and I still lost the most important game of my life.*

“Hehehe. Tough luck, Kuroya! Then again, it was more down to your own undoing than anything.”

“Ugh...” he grunted. Soukichi had lost simply because he’d cracked under the pressure. It’d made him too reckless, and he’d gotten so stressed out about everything that couldn’t play to his full potential.

We’re both basically at the same skill level. Heck, she’s only winning 60% of the games we play these days. I guess it’s obvious I’d be losing when I’m overly worked-up, though.

“Now for the fun part. Are you ready for your forfeit?” she asked.

“Huh? Wh-What forfeit? I don’t remember you saying anything about that.”

“Yeah, because I didn’t tell you about it, silly. But you could easily figure out that there would be a forfeit, right? Things wouldn’t be exciting if there wasn’t something at stake,” she explained.

“Y-You can’t...”

“Hehehe, now what should I make you do...” she brooded with delight. Soukichi, like a defendant awaiting the judge’s verdict, waited on his own sentence to be handed down, which would come just a few moments later. “I got it! You have to say ‘I like you’ to me 10 times!”

“Wh-Whaat?!”

“Can’t do it?”

“O-Of course I can’t! It’s too embarrassing!” he cried.

“Sounds easy enough to me. You just have to say what you’re always thinking about.”

“I don’t think about... Ugh!”

“It’s honestly not much of a forfeit to begin with, though. All it is is my boyfriend telling me how much he likes me.”

“I-I happen to be a firm believer that words like that should be used sparingly! Otherwise, they lose all their weight, and—”

“Oh no you don’t! No excuses allowed!” she interrupted.

“...Ugh.”

“Go on! I’m listening! I’ll give you a nice reward if you do it properly!”

“A-A reward?” he dubiously asked. Her proposal might’ve been more befitting of a demon, but Kasumi was pretty much an angel in Soukichi’s eyes, which left him with a great deal of conflict brewing inside his mind. He would then take about 10 seconds of excruciating consideration before he spoke up again. “F-Fine.”

After a series of deep breaths, Soukichi managed to calm down his racing heart. He then whispered the words with his head hung low, "...I like you."

"Nope, not good enough. You have to say it while looking at me," she protested. Soukichi was trying his best, but Kasumi clearly wasn't satisfied.

"C-Cut me some slack here. Does it really matter where I look?" he inquired.

"You bet," she replied with a composed smile. Her serious expressions told a different story, though, and from Soukichi's point of view, it looked like she was quaking in her boots. "I want you to look my right in the eye and say it."

"..."

Soukichi had exhausted all of his options. It was a request from the girl he loved the most in this world, and he had no other choice but to comply. So he slowly lifted his head and locked eyes with her. She was already doing the same, making it difficult not to avert his glance instinctively. However, he desperately persisted to maintain eye contact.

"I-I like you," he said with all of the courage he could muster while not breaking eye contact with Kasumi. She herself was doing the same, practically watching his every move. They were gazing intently at one another, the mirrored image of each visible in each other's eyes.

"I like you, I like you, I like you," he continued uttering those three simple, yet incredibly special words. With each time he spoke, he could feel his brain turning into mush, and his heart, which was normally shielded with layers upon layers of figurative armor, was now having its defenses stripped away.

"I like you, I like you, I like you."

School was over for the day, and the light of the setting sun shone into the clubroom where a guy and a girl sat alone together. They were gazing passionately into each others' eyes, and the guy was professing his love over and over again.

I don't even know what's happening anymore. Nothing makes a lick of sense to me now. This feels more like a dream than anything else, he thought to himself. Every little sight and sound was fading away, leaving only him and her in their own little world, or so he felt. The only thing he could hear was the awfully noisy beating of his heart and his own voice becoming more and more.

"I like you, I like you, I like you... There we go! That's 10 times!" he proclaimed. As soon as he had finished, it was as if his mind had cooled down in an instant, his consciousness finally having snapped back to reality.

"I gotta admit... that was... crazy," she confessed in a trembling voice, covering her mouth with both hands. Her cheeks were dyed red, and she

was squirming in her seat. “Yup, it sure was crazy. I’m impressed that you managed to pull off something that embarrassing, Kuroya.”

“Huh?! You were the one who told me to do it!” he shouted.

“Hahaha. I guess I did. Mhmm, thank you very much for allowing me the pleasure of enjoying it,” she joked before she stood up from her chair and returned the Reversi set to the shelf. She then grabbed her backpack and said, “Well then, time to go home.”

“Huh? What about my, ummm, reward?” he asked.

“Hmm?”

“You told me that you were gonna give me a reward if I completed the forfeit, and I did!”

“Ummm. Did I really say that? My memory’s a little foggy,” she feigned ignorance, which only plunged poor Soukichi into despair.

Damn it! She played me again. I hate life, he cussed. Kasumi was in complete control and pretty much had him dancing in the palm of her hand. *Is this what it’s like to have a soft spot for your crush? Is this the humiliation I have to endure because I lost in the game of “love”?*

“Aww, no need to look so disappointed,” Kasumi comforted him as she inched closer to Soukichi, who still had his head hung low from being stricken with grief. She leaned in close and whispered, “I love you too, Kuroya.”

“Eeek!” he let out a hysteric shrill as both his mind and heart were fried in an instant. Her sweet and sultry voice, her hot breath tickling his ear, and the warmth he felt when she placed her hand on his shoulder all boasted a devastating potential, a deadly blow that would effortlessly slaughter him. It was absolute overkill, and he felt everything about him being dyed in her hue. “What the...?”

“Haha! And that was your reward! What do you think? You like it?” she asked.

“...”

“Hahaha. Well, better hurry on home! See you later!” she said to him, then left the room in a hurry. Soukichi, in comparison, was glued to his seat, unable to stand up. His body then collapsed forward, melting into a dejected heap on the table, before he unleashed a bevy of otherworldly screams, “Aaaah... aaarrgh!”

I can’t take this anymore. Nothing makes sense, and I don’t know what to do. I don’t even know if these feelings I’m experiencing are out of humiliation or happiness. He was totally baffled. The only thing that was certain was the fact that her voice, words, and breath would linger in his ears for many days to come. “‘I love you’, huh?”

She confessed her feelings with such ease, while Soukichi was practically on his last legs every time he said “I like you.” She even left his heart in shambles, to add insult to injury.

“Dammit. She’s just on a whole other level.”

•

Since Kasumi commuted to school by train, and Soukichi traveled to school by bike, it had become a routine for them to walk together to the bicycle parking after their circle’s activities had concluded for the day. Soukichi was terrified at the prospect of being seen together with her, because he felt it would kickstart rumors about their relationship among the student population. However, for better or worse, that hadn’t happened as of yet.

It’s probably because we don’t really look like a couple when walking side by side, Soukichi concluded. *I bet people were thinking something along the lines of: “Wow, look at Shiramori walking with a guy... Oh wait, it’s that junior she’s in the same circle with. She even gets along with that boring loner? She’s so caring.”*

That was exactly what Soukichi figured the students around them were currently thinking at that moment; however, he’d now grown accustomed to it and even learned not to care about that sort of thing. He figured that just as none of them showed any interest in what he did, he would do likewise and focus on going about his life how he wanted... At least, that was the level of enlightenment he had wanted to attain.

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Reality had reared its ugly head, however; he felt that his experience points in that regard had undergone a total reset ever since he began dating Kasumi. He couldn't help but be extremely conscious of other people's glances, and the more he tried to act normal, the more he was unsure of what acting "normal" even was..

How did I walk when I was with Shiramori again? Was I always in front of her? Or a few steps behind? Maybe right beside her? Hmm, he questioned himself.

"You know, I've been thinking," her voice disrupted his thoughts right as they arrived at their destination. She took no particular notice of Soukichi's internal struggle and spoke to him in a somewhat tender voice. "You get through books pretty quickly."

"Huh? Where did this topic come from?" he inquired.

"Nowhere, really. Just happened to come to mind. Ever since we met, you've never failed to polish off the books I lend you at lightning-speed before giving me your impressions on them the next day."

"I'm a firm believer in getting through the books people give me fast so I can return them to their owner earlier," he explained.

"Really now? I kinda figured that you might've..." she halted for a second before peering into his face with a taunting smile, "wanted me to pay attention to you."

"Wha—"

"Maybe you thought you'd score more points with me if you were even a little bit quicker with them?"

"Nope, that's not it. That's just my philosophy in life: read books I borrowed in a day, and then return them the very next one," he grumbled as he unlocked his bike's cable. "Haah, you don't have to overanalyze everything I do. I mean, ummm, I've had feelings for you for some time, but it's not like everything I do revolved around you—"

"Is that so?" she replied with a grieved expression. She was laughing, but Soukichi could detect hints of self-deprecation and disappointment in her expression. "Ahaha.. I guess I was completely off on that one, then. That's a little embarrassing."

"Shiramori..."

"You know, I always got so happy when you read through my recommendations that fast. Nothing brings more joy to a bookworm than somebody who reads your favorite books and enjoys them just as much as you."

Soukichi understood where she was coming from all too well. The feeling of a friend picking up a book that *you* praised was incomparable. After all, most usually wouldn't even give it a try to begin with.

“I know you’re the type to take good care of books, and you’ve proven that, but I kinda hoped that your feelings for me might’ve played a part in that. Thinking that made me really happy, ahaha. That was probably just me being self-centered, though. Sorry,” she clarified.

“...”

“Well, I’ll be heading home now. Bye-bye,” she said, looking like she was about to burst into tears.

“H-Hold on!” he called out for her in dismay, unable to let her leave in that state. Kasumi came to a halt and didn’t turn back around to face him. This wouldn’t stop Soukichi from summoning all of his strength to lay bare his soul to her. “S-Sorry, that was all a lie. You were right.”

I don’t have any hardcore beliefs like that. I don’t even have a ton of friends to begin with, so I never really had the chance to do that sort of thing. The reason why I tore through those books was because it was *you* who recommended them and lent them to me. Your books always took top priority with me, even when I had other things I wanted to read, because, errr... Well, I couldn’t think of any other way to get your attention,” he explained.

Soukichi was over the moon that he’d gotten the opportunity to both lend and borrow books from the girl he so admired. He was so happy, in fact, that he consistently ended up finishing those books at a rapid pace. However, another, more personal motivation played a factor in his speed.

Kasumi, just like any bookworm, would possibly feel elated if he read any of the books she recommended. Because of that, Soukichi held a faint hope of getting on her good side by reading just that little bit quicker

It’s a pretty roundabout way to appeal to her, yes, but that’s the closest thing to a “love strategy” you can expect from a dud who can’t be direct about his feelings, he thought. “I guess what I’m trying to say is that... everything you said was relatively accurate—”

“Oh, was it now?” she cut him off mid-sentence with a vivacious voice, then finally turned back around. “I knew I was right!” she exclaimed, an indescribable smile plastered on her face. She was clearly overjoyed, like a hunter who had just watched their prey fall right into their trap. “Mhmm, I get it now. So you were that desperate for my attention all this time, hmm?”

“Wait, what?” he asked in confusion.

“Hehe, you’re such a cutie, Kuroya.”

“Y-You tricked me!” he protested.

“You only have yourself to blame for falling for it. All I did was pull a little sad expression,” she refuted.

“Yes, *on purpose*! I’m pretty sure that’s called ‘tricking people’!”

"You lied to me first. Should've been honest with me from the beginning instead of trying to look cool."

"Ugh!" he grunted. *She acted all heartbroken just to get me to drop my guard and say all that embarrassing stuff! I've been had yet again!!*

"You gotta be more careful, Kuroya. All women are masters of the facade. Seeing how easily you got duped just now, you clearly need more experience."

"I-I'm going home!" he stated loudly. He then hopped onto his bike and began pedaling away in a hurry just to get away from Kasumi, who was fastly approaching and trying to poke his cheek. *I gotta make a run for it before I make even more of an ass of myself!*

"See ya tomorrow, Kuroya!" her voice, coupled with some hearty laughter, called out from behind him.

"Ughhh! Ughhh! See you!" he eventually mustered a reply in spite of his anger, frustration, and humiliation. *The more time I spend with her, the more I'm reminded that I'm the true loser of this game of love...*

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It was one year ago now, and Kasumi had just entered her second year of high school.

. Around one month had passed since a certain member had joined the Literature Circle which Kasumi was the representative of.

"Ah. My bad, Shiramori. I haven't finished reading that one yet," a female classmate of Kasumi's said. Kasumi had lent her classmate a certain book and was trying to send some indirect hints that she wanted it back, only to be met with that reply.

"Oh, okay. Nah, it's fine. All good. Just wanted to make sure," she answered back. Kasumi was looking to tell her classmate that she had been borrowing the book for over two weeks now, but in the end, Kasumi kept it to herself, instead flashing her friend a friendly smile.

I'm not even that close to her, anyways, Kasumi thought. *She just happened to be sitting next to me in my second-year class. We ended up chatting with each other, and the conversation had naturally led me to lending her that book*

Having said that, Kasumi was quite hesitant; she didn't feel that they were on close enough terms for her to start giving the girl books yet. Nevertheless, Kasumi went with the flow and lent her the book in the end. Two weeks later, and Kasumi still hadn't gotten any updates on it from her classmate.

"I'm so sorry! I just have so much going on lately!" the classmate explained. She was telling the truth in a way. She was busy going to Karaoke

places, fancy cafes, and talking so much in class that she got in trouble with the teacher.

I could hear everything she was saying, she was so loud, Kasumi thought. Her patience was very much running thin, but she didn't say as much. "It's okay! Take your time!"

Kasumi kept her true thoughts to herself, fighting the urge to confront her classmate and tell her to give her back the book if she wasn't planning on actually reading it. She, however, kept her composure and answered with a diplomatic reply. She knew how awkward things would get if she threw a tantrum over something as trivial as a book.

Such communication skills were crucial for living in modern society, and Kasumi happened to be particularly exceptional at it.

That's not even me boasting. I do genuinely believe that's the case, objectively, she added. *I've been told by others that I'm sociable, friendly, and can read the room well ever since I was young, and I agree.*

Kasumi could get along with just about anyone, regardless if she was meeting them for the first time or not, and could also blend in well with new social groups with ease. All of that, as well as her tall height and mature appearance, had resulted in her securing the "reliable older sister" position during her elementary school days.

She was able to tell exactly what the person she was talking to wanted to hear from a simple conversation with them. She, for example, knew if someone was more looking for mere empathy than an actual solution to their problems.

There was a reason why she'd made an effort to truly understand the people she interacted with, gave neutral replies to the best of her ability, and avoided any unnecessary trouble. Kasumi had realized that she could curry favor with people by acting as the friendly, cheerful character. The community around her would also function seamlessly if she made sure to reply with the correct answer to each situation presented to her, thereby putting her on good terms with her classmates.

To put it bluntly, as Kasumi saw it, the act of "reading the room" was to behave as a "version of oneself" that was required for whatever situation was at hand. In other words, it meant taking upon the role most fitting to the other party's needs, depending on the circumstances, to the best of one's ability.

"Playing a role" has never been a pain for me by any stretch, she pondered. *I'm happy if everyone around me is happy, and I don't really have a reason to make things awkward just to assert my ego. I enjoy being with my close friends, and even when I'm hanging out with someone I'm not as familiar with, as long as we're laughing and having fun, I'm satisfied.*

Kasumi never thought it a bad thing to adopt a fake personality in order to get in other's good graces. However, she would be sometimes tormented by an unrelenting feeling of emptiness because of it.

When I try my best to read others and change my character accordingly, there will be times when I'm compelled by a sense of duty, a sort of voice that tells me something along the lines of: "Right now, the character known as Kasumi Shiramori must make a joke in order to to lighten up the mood," she contemplated. That sentiment was a consistent presence in her life, and it left Kasumi feeling lonely despite being surrounded by a large group of friends.

Keeping up the act gets really tiring, as well. Sometimes, I'd much rather be relaxing somewhere with a good book by myself than being around others, she complained.

"Oh, Kasumi!" a voice called out to Kasumi while she was walking down the hallway toward the entrance. It was an acquaintance of hers.

"Hey, Mitsuki. What's up?" Kasumi replied. Mitsuki was a girl she was classmates with in the previous year. She was in a different friend group than Kasumi, which meant they didn't hang out much. They both still got along well, though.

"Are you doing anything today?" Mitsuki asked.

"Umm... I was actually planning on going home and reading a book," Kasumi answered.

"Nice! Sounds like you're free, then. Wanna go do some Karaoke?"

"..."

"I ended up getting invited to go with some girls in my class, but I'm not really that close to any of them. So I thought it'd be nice if you could come with me! You're good around people you don't know, right?"

Huh. I made it pretty clear that I already have some very important plans going on today, Kasumi thought. *Why, then, did she assume that just because I wanted to do some reading that I'm free? Haah, it is what it is, I guess. Those who read novels and manga to "kill time" will never understand those who actively "make time" to read them*

Having said that, Kasumi felt that it was somewhat socially frowned upon to reject the invitation of someone by telling them they were planning on reading instead.

Even if I was being sincere, there's a high chance that people would lambaste me for coming up with such a convoluted excuse when I could've just told them I didn't feel like going, she pondered. This was when Kasumi's ability to read wherever and whenever she pleased turned into a disadvantage, as others would tend to assume she could take a break from reading at least for *today* if she truly spent a lot of her time doing it.

That's where they're wrong. I do want to read today, Kasumi thought to herself. *And reading is something I feel strongly about*

"Man, I can really relax now that you're tagging along," Mitsuki smiled in relief. Things had escalated past the point of no return, and the overall atmosphere no longer allowed for Kasumi to decline.

I've got no other choice, I suppose, she muttered. *Guess I'll concede. I'm probably the weird one in this scenario, anyways. Who prioritizes reading over hanging out with a friend, right? That's just plain rude,* she thought to herself, reading the situation like she always did. She would then smile back at Mitsuki, prepared to accept her invitation, until...

"Shiramori," another voice called her name. Kasumi turned around to see her junior by one year who also happened to be the vice president of the Literature Circle, Soukichi Kuroya, walking in her direction. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but can I borrow Shiramori for a second?"

"What's wrong, Kuroya?" Kasumi queried.

"Our teacher Yokomizo was looking for you. Said it was something about our circle," Soukichi clarified.

Yokomizo was the name of the advisor teacher for the "Literature Circle," and while that sounded nice on paper, Soukichi and Kasumi were essentially borrowing the name of their teacher to have their circle to begin with. Yokomizo himself seldom came to the clubroom unless there was a pressing issue.

"I was told to bring you along with me. Are you free right now?" Soukichi inquired.

"Ah, I see. Thanks for letting me know," she thanked him, then turned to Mitsuki to apologize. "Sorry, Mitsuki. Looks like I need to go take care of something."

"Yeah, I guess so... Good luck, anyways! Maybe next time?" Mitsuki proposed.

"Sounds good to me!" Kasumi replied, after which Mitsuki waved goodbye and left. "Still, it's kinda unusual for Yokomizo to want to see me for stuff regarding the circle. Do you know what that's about, Kuroya?"

Soukichi then averted his eyes and scratched his head before awkwardly replying, "...I lied. Sorry."

"What... Huh? Y-You lied?" she questioned.

"Yeah, I made it up. Nobody called for you, Shiramori."

"Why would you do that?" she asked.

"I thought that maybe you didn't actually want to go do Karaoke with her," he stated. Kasumi was speechless. "Sorry again for eavesdropping in on your conversation."

"Did my face give it away? Do you think she noticed?"

“Not at all. In fact, you looked like you were really happy about the whole thing, but...” he explained, then briefly paused, “I was thinking how pissed off I’d be if people assumed I had nothing else to do just because I wanted to dive into a good book.”

“...”

“I don’t read out of boredom. I read simply because I *want* to. I even go so far as to make time in my day specifically for that, but then you get people like that who arbitrarily involve you in their plans, only stopping short of telling you that you can read whenever,” he ranted. “Stuff like that grates on your nerves, doesn’t it? The least they could do is apologize for trying to force you into going when you already had plans.”

“...”

“S-Sorry again. Umm, I probably shouldn’t have called for you like that. Honestly, feel free to ignore me and catch up with your friend if you really want to go...” he quickly apologized, taking her silence as a sign of displeasure.

“It’s alright,” she assured him with a shake of her head. “It’s like you said, I didn’t want to go.”

“...Good to know,” he heaved a sigh of relief.

“I do feel a little sorry for Mitsuki, though. We ended up pulling a fast one on her,” she said.

“I don’t know what to say other than sorry.”

“Ahaha, yeah. Let’s apologize to her while she’s not here,” she said, naturally bursting into a smile when she looked at Soukichi’s flustered expression.

“Ummm... Oh right. Here you go, Shiramori,” he said after a moment of silence trying to come up with a conversation topic. He then fiddled around in his bag and handed Kasumi a book; it was the one she had lent him only just yesterday. “I’m done with it, so I’m returning to you.”

“A-Already?” she asked incredulously. The book in question was quite the long one, easily reaching over 500 pages. She figured that he’d take at least a week with it, so him having finished it so soon was quite unexpected to her. “That’s pretty impressive. You’re one fast reader.”

“Not really,” he coldly replied. “I just believe in reading through books I’ve borrowed ASAP.”

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Kasumi recollected the events of one year ago as she watched Soukichi’s figure receding into the distance on his bike. “Hehe,” her face naturally curled up into a smile. *Mhmm, so that’s how it is. Kuroya gobbled up all those books because it was me who was recommending them,* she thought. *He had*

feelings for me all that time, but he tried to cover it up by putting on a front and claiming it was only a habit of his.

Oops, gotta watch myself. People will think I'm a weirdo if I keep on grinning to myself, she warned, giving her cheeks a light few pats to stop herself from smiling. *I'm good at fake smiles, but I'm really bad at holding my natural ones back when I get too happy...*

"Couldn't think of any other way to get my attention, huh?" she muttered Soukichi's words that reeked of low self-esteem and debasement to herself.

"You really have no idea, do you, Kuroya?" she asked herself. *It's like you don't know anything, anything at all... You don't know how much you've made my heart flutter to the point of leaving it a squishy mess.*

Chapter Two

Dating Tutorial for Noobs

Whenever somebody was isolated from the rest of the class, there were generally three ways in which they spent their free time: self-studying or reading, pretending to be asleep, and leaving the class and going somewhere else entirely. And for his free time during second period, Soukichi went with the third of those options.

So he left his classroom, walked down the hallway, and descended the flight of stairs with no set purpose or destination in mind. He then found his friend, Tokiya, changing into his slippers at the entrance of the school. Tokiya, while attempting to stifle his yawns, began to head in the direction of Soukichi and soon took notice of him.

"Yo," Tokiya greeted him with a light wave of his hand.

"Hey, man. Nice and timely today, I see. What's up?" Soukichi asked.

"I slept in late. Megu left for work without waking me up. Can you believe that shit?"

"Spent the night at a woman's place again, huh?" Soukichi commented. Tokiya apparently hadn't bothered returning home last night, instead just coming to school directly from his recent hookup's place. That explained why his shirt was all creased and wrinkled. "Hold up, who's Megu? Weren't you going out with Satomi?"

"Nah, I cut Satomi off. As for Megu, I met her only yesterday. Still not sure of what our relationship is at the moment." Tokiya explained.

"Uh-huh," Soukichi responded. Tokiya, as per usual, was living in a completely different world than Soukichi. *What sort of high-school student actually scores with an adult woman on their first meeting? Meanwhile, I'm more the type of guy that'd stand out at a college-preparatory school. Him and I truly are polar opposites.*

"What's the long face for, my guy?" Tokiya asked.

"Nothing. Just happy that you're living your life to the fullest."

"How about you? You enjoying yours?"

"Enjoying what about it, exactly?"

"Your first-ever girlfriend, obviously," Tokiya teased. "Give your old buddy the deets. What base are you on with your sweetheart senior?"

"None. We literally just started dating the other day."

"Huh? Boooring," Tokiya shrugged. "Then again, I kinda expected you wouldn't get anywhere with her since it's you we're talking about. Would be a cold day in hell if you did."

“Get off my case, man,” Soukichi firmly stated, now fed up with Tokiya’s comments. “I will not be some total beta now that I’ve started dating Shiramori. I’m gonna take the lead in this relationship, and—”

“—You talking about me?” a voice from behind suddenly inquired.

“Whoaa?!” a horrified shrill escaped Soukichi’s mouth, and he practically jumped in surprise. He turned his head, and sure enough, Kasumi was standing there.

“Ahaha, look at this scaredy cat,” Kasumi laughed. “I happened to spot you just now, so I thought I’d come say hello. Heya, Kuroya and Shimokura.”

“Wassap,” Tokiya calmly replied while ignoring Soukichi, who was still battling to calm down his racing heart.

“So were you guys talking about me? I feel like I heard my name come up,” she said.

“N-Nope! Didn’t happen! Not even once... right, Tokiya?” Soukichi asked.

“Haha, yup. What he said,” Tokiya confirmed as he suppressed the urge to laugh at a panicking Soukichi. “So... apparently you guys are dating now, from what I’ve heard,” he then brought up Soukichi and Kasumi’s relationship.

Welp. This isn’t good. I just realized that I spilled the beans on our relationship without even talking to her first, Soukichi pondered, now worried he might have gotten on Kasumi’s bad side. However...

“Oh. You did?” she replied, seemingly unaffected or even the slightest bit annoyed by it. “Hehe. Well, yeah, that did happen.”

“Congratulations. On behalf of all of Soukichi’s friends, I give you my full blessing,” Tokiya said.

“Aww, thank you,” she replied.

“But you know, that’s only if you’re actually serious about him,” Tokiya’s mouth curled at the corners in a cynical smile.

“Wha? What are you talking about?” she asked in honest confusion while Tokiya took a single step forward.

“It’s pretty easy for a hottie like you to send up a zero-romantic experience, virgin loner like Soukichi. I just wanna tell you that if you’re doing it just to play with his pure heart like that...” Tokiya’s voice trailed off, his eyes briefly flashing with a sharp glisten. It was only for that solitary moment, though, as his expression would immediately warp back into a smile, “...then please let me in on the action. Might as well have some fun together at his expense.”

“Huh? H-Hey now,” Soukichi interjected.

“...Pfftt, ahaha! Mhmm, you bet. You’ll be the first to know when it happens, Shimokura,” she said.

“Thank you. See y'all later now,” Tokiya said his goodbyes, then left Soukichi, on the other hand, stood dumbfounded, not particularly amused about how he was now getting bullied by two people at once—that was when Kasumi broke the silence.

“What a good guy he is,” she said quietly.

“He is?” Soukichi asked.

“He did make a joke out of it all, but he’s probably genuinely worried about you, Kuroya. He wouldn’t have indirectly warned me that I’d have hell to pay if I hurt you otherwise.”

“...”

“You’ve got yourself a great friend.”

“I suppose,” Soukichi vaguely replied. *It feels embarrassing to admit it outright, honestly...*

“By the way, did you know that Shimokura is actually really popular among the third-year students? So many girls from my class have approached him to ask for his number,” she said.

“That makes sense. He’s always been a hit with the ladies since middle school.”

“Yeaah, I can see why. I mean, he is pretty attractive and all”

“...Are tall, handsome men like Tokiya your type, too?” Soukichi instinctively asked in a sullen tone.

“Hmm? Might that perhaps be jealousy I’m smelling, hmm?” she chuckled, clearly enjoying Soukichi’s reaction.

“Ugh.. N-Nobody’s being jealous or anything like that! I was just curious,” he clarified.

“Heh-heh-heh, so that’s all it takes for the burning flame of jealousy to light up in you? You’re such a cutie, Kuroya.”

“Am I talking to a brick wall...?” he objected, but to no avail; the smile failed to come unstuck from Kasumi’s face.

Kasumi then got closer to him and whispered into his ear, “You don’t have to worry, Kuroya. You’ll always be my one and only.”

“...Gah?!” he grunted. Her words were as frighteningly damaging as ever, enough to shatter any man. “Th-There you go, making fun of me again.”

“I wasn’t, though. That was me telling the truth,” she stated, but Soukichi nevertheless detected hints of teasing behind her words that contradicted what she was saying.

Still, she did say I was her one and only, he contemplated. *She’s probably not lying about that part, or at least that’s what I’d like to... No, that’s what I will believe.*

While it was an established fact by now that Soukichi had a low self-esteem, he still wanted to trust the words of the person he loved the most. It

would've been easier to ignore it and resign himself to self-deprecation, but that in itself would be not only meaningless, but also disrespectful to Kasumi and her feelings. It had only been three days since they'd started dating, but Soukichi had faith that their relationship was the real thing and not just some twisted joke.

That's all great and all, but there's something that irks me, an issue I've been ignoring all this time, he thought. And that something was that they're, as she put it, as of yet a "trial" couple.

"Do you wanna try going out with me?" her words rang clear in his mind.

What exactly did she mean by that? And how does being a "trial" couple differ from a normal one in the end? he contemplated. *One thing I have to do is clarify what exactly is and isn't appropriate in this current relationship*

"Nope. Nuh-uh. You can't be serious. Where's the fun in making it clear-cut?" she asked. It was after school, and they were both in the literary circle's room. Soukichi had conveyed his hopes and intentions to Kasumi, but her reply hadn't been favorable, to say the least. She simply refused to explain it to him and had a rather stunned expression on her face. "Everything will just get really boring if we start introducing rules as to what flies and what doesn't."

"Boring, huh?" Soukichi commented.

"Yes, boring. One-hundred percent!"

"I understand what you're saying, but not having some sort of line drawn makes me feel anxious."

"Okay then, let me ask you this," she said. "Are you really okay with us setting that line right here and now?"

"Wha...?"

"We could just get down into the nitty-gritty if you'd like and start deciding what's fine and what's off-limits as a trial couple"

"..."

"Doesn't that sound super stale? How do I put this... Love is about the experience of it all. The tactics, mind games between the couple, and such. How much you're into it, and if you're both on the same wavelength also plays a part. Don't you think that's the real charm of being a couple?"

"Y-You make a good point," he accidentally coincided. *I've never had any sort of relationship before, so I can only speculate, but I'm guessing normal couples don't just sit down and lay out some ground rules at the beginning.*

"I know, right? A relationship's progress should be based on the general mood between them and how they feel about each other at the time. Trying to settle on what kind of relationship each person wants in advance is pretty much impossible," she continued.

“So I’ve now made a fool out of myself by asking such a lame question?” he asked.

“Yup. It was incredibly lame, honestly.”

“...Ugh.”

“I was like: ‘wow, that sounds exactly like something someone with zero romantic experience would say,’” Kasumi added with some hesitation, though that didn’t do much to dampen her scathing remark.

“...Ughhh!” he groaned. *God, I feel so depressed now.*

Much like the road to hell, Soukichi’s good intentions of wanting to detail set rules and standards had wrought unforeseen consequences. It was tantamount to him asking Kasumi about how far he could take things with her, which, in retrospect, ranked highly as one of the most tasteless things he had ever done.

Holy crap, that was sooo cringey, he disparaged himself. *I literally just put my lack of confidence and general experience on full display there. I’m such a moron!*

“Ahaha, no need to get all miserable like that. I didn’t mind it too much,” she gave Soukichi a grin in an attempt to assure Soukichi, who was currently dealing with some intense melancholy.

What a stupid game “love” is. Its rules are just as cryptic as ever. I hate this, he murmured.

“Aww, well, you don’t have to think too hard about it. Oh, I know! You could think of it as a ‘pre-dating period’ of sorts,” she clarified.

“A pre-dating period...?”

“Mhmm. That make sense?” she asked.

“I get the gist of it, yeah,” he answered.

“It really is crazy, though. Westerners have such a totally different view on dating overseas. Romantic relationships don’t start from a confession like it does here. It’s really hard for us Japanese to grasp, that’s for sure,” Soukichi added.

“Right? It’s so bizarre!” Kasumi agreed.

The whole culture surrounding “confessions” was virtually non-existent in the West to begin with. This meant that no relationship would start with one professing their love for another, and in turn, led to people outside of Japan and Asia as a whole to deem “confessions” as a rather peculiar behavior.

But then that begged the following question: How would foreigners become a couple without an outright confession? The answer would be quite simple—a trial period that was known as “pre-dating.” This was a time in which people gauged the feelings of a potential love interest that came right before a genuine romantic relationship started as a form of

testing the waters. It was a period of being more than friends, but not quite lovers yet, so to speak.

"I knew Westerners slipped into a pre-dating period before an actual relationship began. As for how that all works, though, I have no idea.. Being that there's no confession and all, then how do you know you've actually begun the pre-dating period? And more importantly, how do things progress into a serious relationship afterwards...?" he pondered.

"Depends on the general mood, and the impression you get from them, I suppose. It's kinda like you're finding yourself stumbling into and out of a relationship in equal parts. I've even heard you get laughed at if you keep asking for confirmation on every little detail, since it makes you sound like an elementary student," she explained.

"Th-That's way too ambiguous for me" he replied. *Again with that "mood" and "impression you get" talk. The western version of romance sounds pretty rough. I can't see myself being able to keep up with it when I'm barely keeping my head above water here as is.*

"Foreigners like making their feelings known to people, yeah? They must hate all those vague Japanese expressions when turning down things such as: 'No need to' or 'Don't trouble yourself.' So how in the world do they suddenly stop speaking their mind when it's related to romance and make it so you have to 'guess' if the other person is into you or not?" he asked.

"Hahaha. Yeah, it's pretty weird," Kasumi said. She then appeared as if she had just figured out an answer, and her legs began squirming. "Picking up on specific social 'cues' must be the most important part in Western culture rather than being told directly."

"Cues...?"

"Yeah. Things that make it obvious you're into someone. Like, for example..." her voice trailed off, and the very next moment, Soukichi felt a chill running down his spine. Something was touching his leg from underneath the table, poking and gently brushing against it. Obviously, he couldn't see what was truly happening due to the table being in the way, but Kasumi's playful smirk didn't allow for much speculation.

"Wh-What are you... Ah!" he cried.

"Heh-heh, they apparently consider this a cue overseas," she rested her head atop her hand and cracked a broad smirk. "You've seen those foreign dramas where people get poked under the table, haven't you?"

"I-I have! Please stop it!" he pleaded.

"Hmm? Why should I, though?" she feigned ignorance as her legs moved further and further up his body "I took off my slippers, so it's not like I'm not gonna get you dirty or anything."

Trust me, that only makes it worse! he complained to himself. As he was doing that, he could feel the touch of her toes, which stood out even from beneath her socks, tracing up and down his leg. *She's gonna drive me insane...*

"So how is it, Kuroya? Are you picking up on my hints?" she asked.

"P-Please, I beg of you. Please stop," he implored, hurriedly shifting his seat backwards to escape Kasumi's legs. *I've had it up to here with her making me her little plaything. Besides, I feel like if she keeps doing that, it's only gonna awaken a new fetish in me*

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"Aww, why did you run away?" she coyly asked.

"I'm not. It's called a tactical retreat."

"Yeah, that's the same thing," she argued.

"No it's not. Retreat implies that I'm preparing a counterattack against you."

"Ahaha, really now? Can't wait for when you start fighting back, then," she flashed a cheerful smile.

I talk big about "counterattacking" and all that, but that was just so I had some sort of comeback for her. I can't imagine there will ever be a day when I can finally go toe to toe with her, he thought.

"Anyways, you can think of our current relationship as still being in the 'pre-dating' period as Western folks put it," Kasumi concluded while putting her slippers back on. Soukichi nodded in agreement before a sudden realization soon hit him.

"...Wait a second," he said.

"Hm? What's wrong?"

"Doesn't the 'pre-dating' period allow for the person to test the waters with multiple potential suitors at the same time?" he asked.

As the name implied, a trial period was ultimately just a trial, after all. This meant that seeing other people or even entering into relationships with them while someone was still in the midst of this testing period wouldn't be considered cheating by any parties involved.

It was also fairly common for a person to openly go on "pre-dates" with a handful of people right from the start, perhaps meeting with as many as two or three people at a time before finally settling on a partner after getting familiar enough with all of them.

That sort of thing is pretty frowned upon here in Japan, Soukichi thought. *But I guess it's the norm for foreigners... Sounds more like dating sim protagonists getting involved with multiple heroines simultaneously than anything*

"Ah, you're not wrong there. There are some people who try their luck with more than one person during that time, for sure," she concurred.

"Would the same thing apply for... us, as well?" he asked.

"Hmm. I think that's a bit too much for me, so for us, let's make it off-limits to see other people," she suggested after a moment to think it over. "It's true that we *are* still a trial couple in our pre-dating period, but that doesn't mean we can't introduce Japanese-style rules. So yeah, no form of cheating allowed."

"A-Alrighty then," he heaved a sigh of relief, trying his hardest to maintain a facade of composure. *Thank the heavens. The mere thought of her saying that she'd be okay with seeing multiple people is enough to make me*

sick to my stomach. Even imagining Shiramori with another guy... I just can't stand it

"Feeling relieved?" she asked with a beaming smile, as if she had peered directly into his mind.

Soukichi averted his eyes in response, barely mustering the will to reply, "...I don't know what you're talking about."

"Hehe. I've told this before, Kuroya. You're the one and only for me," she said.

"..."

"Oh, and that rule obviously also applies to you. No cheating or checking out any other girls, you hear me?" she stated.

"That's the last thing you have to worry about, Shiramori. You? You're really popular all around, but me on the other hand? I don't even have any other girls' phone numbers besides you," he said.

"You never know with these things. Your breathtaking dream girl might show up in front of you one day without any warning, you know."

"There's no way another dream girl like you would ever come into my life. It's enough of a miracle that I met you to begin with—"

"Huh?" Kasumi let out a gasp, and her eyes shot open in surprise.

Wait, hold the goddamn phone. WHAT THE HELL DID I JUST SAY?! he screamed internally.

"So that's how it is, hmm?" she teased. She had a bewildered expression and a fully-flushed face at first, but her cheeks would gradually shift into an elated grin. "Oooh, I see Kuroya has finally revealed what he thinks about me?"

Kasumi was now filled with joy as shown by her massive smile. She then leaned forward over the table to get a closer look at Soukichi. The only thing the poor guy could do was try his best to avoid her inquisitive stares.

"So I'm your so-called 'dream girl,' huh?" she asked.

"...That was just a figure of speech," he answered.

"You think I'm breathtaking, too?"

"...Also a figure of speech."

"And didn't you also say that getting to meet me was pretty much a miracle? Mhmm, mhmm," she continued.

"La-la-la! Shuddup, shuddup, shuddup!" he yelled as he covered both his ears. This universal sign of losing an argument was all but a declaration of surrender on Soukichi's part. Another day had come and gone with Soukichi's utter defeat in the game of love. *She's too damn strong, and well, shooting myself in the foot doesn't exactly help me either.*

For all intents and purposes, they had become a "trial couple" or, to put it in western terms, they were in their "pre-dating" period. There was no set

time limit or rules that existed between them for the time being, with the nature of their relationship becoming quite ill-defined and dubious, dictated solely by the general mood and impressions they would get from one another, as Kasumi had put it. Still, one exception was made in the form of the singular rule established between the two: that cheating of any kind was forbidden.

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Chapter Three

Forced Installation

If love were actually considered a game, it'd most certainly be dubbed a piece of garbage by the consensus of all the unpopular guys around the globe. Soukichi shared such a sentiment, and there was one specific part about it that he hated the most: the fact that everyone was forced to play it.

It didn't matter if a person lived in a peaceful country without any conflict to speak of, or in a war-torn nation that dealt with conflict on a daily basis; either way, humans would always find a way to enter some sort of romantic relationship. It might've been a product of humanity's carnal and primitive instincts. It might also have been due to specific cultural behaviors. Nobody quite had a solid grasp on what caused it. But alas, the bottom line was that humans end up falling in love.

Just about anyone would eventually grow fond of someone if they lived long enough, regardless if they were actively searching or asking for that special someone or not.

It's kinda like being forced to buy into a product, Soukichi thought. *There are already many terrible games out there, but this one is cut above the rest with how it forces you to play it even if you don't want to.*

Love was a game that life forced you to install and subsequently forced you to play. It was akin to a malicious computer virus, in Soukichi's opinion. It would only take one careless, coincidental interaction for the game app called "love" to forcibly install itself on the hard drive known as oneself. And so it would seal one's fate, forcing them to play it for the rest of their living days.

The worst part about it is how much memory it takes up, Soukichi thought. That game exhausted the majority of the storage available, making all the other processes slower and resulting in a considerable dip in performance. Not to mention there was a worryingly high chance of glitching other programs just from the game being installed.

It truly is the crappiest game out there, he pondered. *I wonder when my heart ended up getting infected by it...*

•

Around one week had passed with no major hiccups since the school's entrance ceremony had taken place. Just as was the case with many high schools, Midoriba High allocated a period of time every year for the newly

enrolled students to observe various clubs and their activities before choosing which one they'd participate in.

And so the majority of students were making their way to the clubs they were interested in becoming a part of, some interacting with the seniors of said clubs and joining them on a trial basis, while others were receiving a warm welcome as official members.

School was over for the day, and Soukichi was heading toward the literary club room located at the corner of the third floor of the school's secondary building. He had no particular reason for wanting to join that club. Books just so happened to be his sole interest, so he figured that was the best club for him.

"Here we are," Soukichi said, taking a deep breath after confirming he'd arrived at the right place with the door plague. He wasn't aware at the time that the Literary Club had already been turned into the Literature Circle by then, and, more importantly, he hadn't a clue about the identity of the only member the club had.

You need to calm down, dude. It's all gonna be okay. Anyone who joins their school's literature club is typically an outcast loner anyway, he thought, giving in to his preconceived notions. *They're all gonna be just like me, and I know for a fact I can get along with my own kind. That's how it is for all antisocial bookworms; we can get along well enough while also making sure to keep an adequate distance from each other..*

Soukichi continued to reassure himself as he put his hand on the door handle. "E-Excuse me," he offered a greeting before he opened the door—what he saw next took his breath away.

It was a normal classroom like any other, its walls furnished by large bookshelves that were packed with a countless number of books and documents. A long table with a number of pipe chairs surrounding it was also situated in the middle of the room.

Sat in one of those chairs was a girl with a book in hand.. Her slender fingers were flipping through the pages, and while she had a serious expression on her face, she was smiling ever so slightly.

She's... gorgeous, he thought. The scene of the girl enjoying her book in a room colored by sunset hues possessed its own unique charm and artistry that rivaled that of the most famous paintings. It was serene, profoundly beautiful, and, dare he say, divine.

This enchanting view, however, was disrupted in an instant by a surprised gasp,, as she had noticed Soukichi entering the room. She then tucked a bookmark between the pages of her book to mark how far she had read and ran over to him.

“Are you interested in joining this club—I mean, this circle?!” she yelled with enthusiasm.

“Umm...” he faltered.

“You’re a freshman, yeah?”

“I-I am.”

“Nice! Whoa, you have no idea how happy I am right now. For a second, I thought that nobody was gonna join again!” she exclaimed. That austere atmosphere of mere moments ago now felt like it was nothing more than a mirage, having evaporated into thin air to be replaced with the cheerful and friendly manner in which she greeted him.

Conversely, Soukichi couldn’t even look her in the face properly, his gaze darted all about the room, yet never locking with hers.. It was clear how nervous this situation had made him. She was a stranger, a senior, and a beauty to top it all off; it was pretty much the closest thing to a natural enemy that a loner like him could have. His social anxiety had gotten so severe, in fact, that Soukichi had to make an active effort to suppress it.

“Ah, I really wasn’t expecting a freshman to swing by, so I didn’t have any snacks prepared... J-Just sit down and make yourself comfortable for now!” she practically ordered, then showed him to one of the chairs.

She was the first to take a seat, and Soukichi was expected to have followed suit. However, after a lengthy period of consideration, he opted on the chair diagonal to her. Soukichi simply didn’t have courage to sit facing opposite of her during their first meeting. She appeared taken aback for a brief moment, but she ultimately never pursued it any further.

“Ummm, anyways! Welcome to the Literature Circle! I say circle, but it’s just me here, haha,” she scoffed.

“Errr...” he stammered. The “Literature Circle” bit had caught his attention, of course, yet there was something more pressing that he ended up instinctively asking. “You’re here all by yourself, Shirmori?”

“Sure am. Sad as it is, the youth of this era have been overall less and less interested in reading, which is kinda crazy if you ask me. Wait, did I hear that right? How do you know my name?” she asked.

“Well, you know... You are fairly popular around the school,” he answered.

“You talking about that ‘Four Heavenly Beauties’ thingy?”

“Th-That’s the one.”

“Wow, for real? Man, word sure does travel fast. It’s even reached the freshmen by now,” she said.

The senior who currently looked visibly disquieted and practically at her wit’s end was someone Soukichi knew all too well. It was Kasumi Shiramori,

famously known as the “Cougar” by the entire student population, as well as one of the “Four Heavenly Beauties.”

Soukichi didn’t have any friends in class, as one would expect. Nevertheless, he had heard his male classmates talk about them a lot, and he had seen the “Four Heavenly Beauties” paraded all across school grounds from afar, letting everyone know who sat atop the school’s social pyramid.

“I’m really not a fan of that nickname. You’d think that ‘Four Heavenly Beauties’ is a silly nickname in and of itself, but then they came up with ‘Cougar’ for me. What exactly are you implying with that? I’m a healthy *young* girl who’s WAY under 30, thank you!” she bemoaned while pursing her lips in irritation.

“I didn’t expect you’d be in the literary club, err, I mean, the literature circle, was it? Of all places,” he said.

“Hahaha, if only I had a nickel every time I heard that. That ‘I don’t look like the type who’d read,’ type of stuff,” she chuckled, then placed her hands on top of the book she was reading. “I just love it so much, you know? It’s been like that ever since I was a kid,” she whispered and flashed a dignified smile. She looked at the book with downcast eyes, her slender fingers tracing the book’s binding.

Her smile and each one of her gestures were so captivating that it caused Soukichi’s heart to skip a beat. Kasumi possessed an allure truly unlike that of a normal high-school student.

Not gonna lie, I can see why people call her “Cougar,” he thought to himself, utterly spellbound by her looks.

“Oh, this?” she asked, seemingly misunderstanding the intent behind his gaze, and proceeded to show him the title of the book.

“Huh? Oh yeah, that one... It’s the current most popular series, yeah?” he said.

“Yup. It’s the original novel of that popular series that’s getting a movie adaption. Right now, it’s one you’d find prominently displayed at the front of any bookshop when you walk in...” she clarified, looking somewhat flustered, even shy, maybe.

“Maaan, talk about a major screw up. I’m so embarrassed! I’m supposed to be the rep of the literature circle, but here I am looking like such a poser by jumping on the bandwagon of what’s in right now,” she added. “Haah, I would’ve picked up a more diehard-looking masterpiece to make myself look more well read if I knew a freshman was coming.”

I get where she’s coming from, he thought. For people who had reading as a major hobby, it became rather difficult for them to recommend more mainstream books or manga to people looking to get into the medium. It

was the same for self-proclaimed musicheads who tended to recommend an indie band or film enthusiasts who vouched for older western movies.

"I don't see the problem in that at all. There's no such thing as a poser when it comes to books. Not like anyone's giving you an award for reading the classics, either. Besides, it's..." Soukichi's voice trailed off, then he dug around inside his bag and took something out from within. It was the book that he had been reading in his free time at school, and it also happened to be...

"...The same thing I've been reading as of late," he revealed as he showed her his own copy.

"Wha?! No way!" she yelled in surprise, before leaning herself against him and grabbing onto the book. Perhaps she was too excited, however, as her hand touched Soukichi's in the process.

W-Wow, I touched her hand. I just touched a girl's hand! he began to freak out.

"It really is the same book... How crazy is that?! What a coincidence, huh?" she exalted, not even slightly bothered by the fact she'd rubbed against his hand. Soukichi's heart, meanwhile, was about to beat out of his chest. "It's amazing! Amazing, I tell you! This has got to be fate."

"F-Fate?" he questioned.

"Yup! We were destined to meet each other right here and now!" she asserted in a confident, yet pleasant tone. "Just think about it. A chance meeting of two people, and they turned out to be reading the *exact same* book? The odds must be at least a million, even a billion-to-one! This is pretty much a miracle as far as I'm concerned!"

"I mean, if it were the same classic masterpiece or a niche Western novel, then maybe, but the chances of us simultaneously reading the best-selling novel of the week in Japan are probably pretty high," he said.

"Oh, I get it. You're one of those killjoys, aren't you?" she said with a peevish expression.

"Ah... S-Sorry."

"Hehe, just kidding. No need to apologize," she assured him, her expression having softened into a warm smile. "Calling it a miracle might've been a bit much, as you said... but these kinds of coincidences make me happy."

"...I see."

"I'm also super pumped about all the activities we're gonna do here, especially since it's looking like we have the same tastes and all!. It's really nice to meet you, umm... Oh. Sorry, I guess I haven't gotten your name yet."

Oh, yeah. Everything's just been happening so far, I haven't even gotten the chance to introduce myself yet, he thought. "It's Soukichi. Soukichi Kuroya."

“Kuroya... Mhmm, got it,” she said. “It’s nice to meet you, Kuroya! You’ll be the vice-rep of the circle starting today!”

Looks like me joining the circle has already been decided, he contemplated.

They then spent their time in deep discussion until it was time to return home, with the majority of the discussion being about books. Soukichi was catastrophically abysmal at communicating with others, but he could at least manage a casual conversation about a mutual topic, even if it was with someone he just met.

I was able to hold my own when talking with Shiramori, somehow. I’m almost shocked at how smoothly I completed the “converse with a senior you just met” event, he mulled. Soukichi, a loner who considered speaking with girls as nothing more than an agonizingly nerve-wracking experience, succeeded in having a stress-free conversation with her, or so he felt. *If I had to describe it, it was fun. Real fun. I really hope I can speak with her more in the future...*

“Whoa! Look at the time!” she exclaimed while looking at the clock hanging on the wall. It was around the time when the scarlet rays of sunset that were streaming in through the window were increasing in their intensity. “We were so absorbed in our conversation we didn’t keep track of the time. This isn’t looking good. We need to bounce before our advisor teacher Yokomizo catches us. Some teachers can be pretty strict about when we need to leave the school.”

Kasumi began putting her things away in a rush after saying that. She then donned the blazer she had taken off previously and hurriedly reached out toward what had been their first conversation topic of the day: the two books in the middle of the table. One belonged to Soukichi, and the other to Kasumi, and she took one without much thought.

“Ah...” he instinctively yelped.

“Hm? What’s up?” she asked.

“N-No, it’s nothing. Don’t worry about it,” he answered and stuffed the other copy inside his bag.

•

Back to present time one year later, and it was a bit past eight PM. Soukichi was in his room on his home’s second floor.

“Haah,” he let out a deep sigh, staring at the book in his hand after he’d broken free of his recollections. This book came into his possession one year ago, it having the same title that’d allowed him to experience that minuscule miracle of a moment when he first met Kasumi. However, this wasn’t *his* copy.

"I gotta say, that was pretty creepy even by my standards," another sigh of self-hatred escaped him. If Soukichi were being honest with himself, he'd realized that Kasumi had picked up his copy by accident back then. It turned out that they'd both bought their copy around the same time and from the same chain of bookstores, too. Their bookmarks were identical as a result, albeit they were placed in between different sets of pages.

I'd immediately noticed that she took my copy, which was why I ended up making that weird noise, butI never pointed it out in the end, he murmured. The next thing he knew, he'd had the other book in his hands and was stowing it away inside his bag. *I basically played dumb and took her book like it was mine.*

"God, I'm actually disgusting. Legit disgusting," he cursed himself, tormented by self-loathing. Soukichi himself had no clue why he'd done so to this very day.

I mean, this is me we're talking about... Even then, I don't know what got into me. It wasn't because I wanted one of my hot senior's things, I think. At least, I'm pretty sure I don't have any stalker-like desires like that, he said.

I thought it'd be simply romantic or "deep," I guess, in today's terms, he continued. *Two people who met by pure coincidence also happened to be reading the same book. And then they'd both exchanged their copy for the other's. It's just...*

"...Just still disgusting, no matter what spin I put on it," he retorted against himself, returning the book back on the bookshelf. Soukichi put it back as the first book on the left on the highest shelf, where it'd stand out the most.

The story overall wasn't that engaging for me, to be frank. I don't mean it as a dig at the best selling book in the whole of Japan at the time. It just wasn't my thing, he pondered. Having said that, the book continued to rest on Soukichi's shelf in the most prominent spot, reigning supreme as a special book in his collection

"..."

Soukichi ultimately got caught up in the trash game known as "love" from the moment he laid eyes on Kasumi. The game had forced its way onto his hard drive, took up an absurd amount of storage, and infected the majority of his heart. It didn't matter whether he was asleep or awake; she was the only thing he could think of. His thoughts were so occupied with Kasumi that she had pushed all of his unpleasant memories and traumatic past.

It was love at first sight, to put it nicely, he thought. *But looking at it from a not-so-positive angle, and you'd get yourself the cliche story of a bland, boring loner who fell in love with an upbeat beauty just because she was*

kinda nice to him. I just deluded myself into thinking I had a chance with her just because we had similar interests. It's all just a silly, arrogant dream.

"I wonder if Shiramori noticed that I took her book?" he contemplated. A year had passed, and she'd never brought it up to him in the end. It left Soukichi with mixed emotions; he was in constant fear of her finding out about what he'd done, but also felt exhausted in a way, like some of his stress had been relieved.

"Hm?" Soukichi noticed his phone—which was on top of his bed with him—was vibrating. It was a notification from Kasumi. It wasn't as if they hadn't exchanged messages back and forth before, but the frequency of which they came since becoming a couple had increased significantly. *Shiramori sends me a lot of random messages, too, so I'm kinda used to it by now... I think.*

Soukichi, who'd made a habit of hitting the panic button each time he got a message from Kasumi back when his feelings were still one-sided, was now unfazed by it all. He was proud of himself, believing that he had matured as a man and that his shy days were long behind him. However, the message Kasumi sent would bring him crashing back down to reality, almost making him wheeze.

"You're thinking about me, aren't you?" her message read. Soukichi could feel his heart thumping fast and his face burning up.

God, just when I think I've finally figured her out, she pulls something like this out of left field. How much more does she need to tease me for her to be satisfied? he asked himself. He eventually somehow managed to slow down his heavy breathing before proceeding to think about how he'd reply.. *The one good thing was that she sent this by text. She wouldn't have let me live it down if she heard me yelp over the phone.*

"Totally off the mark. There you go again, only thinking about yourself," Soukichi followed up with a collected reply.

"Liar, liar, pants on fire," she immediately responded.

What is she, a freakin' psychic?! he complained, then sent her another message. "Why would I lie?"

"Okay then, what were you thinking of?" she asked.

"About why Bombay Ducks have that specific name. Who in the world decided to name them 'ducks' when they aren't one to begin with? Sawfish were named as such because they practically have a saw blade attached to them, and a megamouth shark got its name from its massive mouth. It makes me want to go up to one of those 'ducks' and tell them to drop the act and get a more suitable name for a *fish*."

"Ahaha, deep in thought about the weirdest of things as usual, I see," she replied. They then had a light conversation about nothing important in

particular until Soukichi put an end to it by telling her he had something to do.

"Well then, I'll talk to you later," he said. *I would've loved to keep chatting with her more, but I can't have her stay up late with me. Also, I wasn't lying about having something to do.*

"Let's do this," he psyched himself up, went over to his desk, sat in his chair, and booted up his laptop.

Chapter Four

An Unwelcome Random Encounter

It was after school, and Soukichi and Kasumi were sitting together in their clubroom.

"Actually, now that I think about it..." Kasumi said, having remembered something all of a sudden. She was seated directly across from Soukichi today, as even he couldn't allow his pride to be hurt any further after the teasing extravaganza he'd been forced to endure the other day . "We've known each for a year now, right?"

"True, but why bring that up now?" he asked.

"It just dawned on me that we were spending all that time in this secluded, out-of-the-way room all by ourselves. "

"What are you getting at?"

"Nothing. It's just kinda... naughty, in a way."

"I don't see what's so naughty about it, to be honest."

"Hmm? You really think so?" she questioned, flashing her trademark playful smirk. "Say, Kuroya. You liked me right from the get-go, right?"

"Urgh."

"And that was the case during all that time when we were alone together in this club room, hmm? You looked calm on the surface, but you were actually burning with love on the inside whenever you spoke with me, weren't you?" she badgered.

"..."

"Hehe. See? ," she grinned at a tongue-tied Soukichi.

I'm still not sure how that's naughty and all, but I'll say one thing: Shiramori repeating the word "naughty" that many times is a thousand times more naughty, he thought.

"Haah, I never even thought I'd be going out with you a year ago," she said as she leaned back in her chair and gazed up at the ceiling. "What about you, Kuroya? Ever thought that we'd end up dating?"

"Not in a million years. I didn't exactly have high hopes for getting a girlfriend to begin with," he answered.

"Really now? I bet you still wanted it to happen, though, didn't you?"

"Ugh."

"Ah, there it is. You really are like an open book with how easy you are to read. Your feelings are written all over your face to such a degree that it's making *me* blush."

"L-Leave it already!" he objected, his cheeks burning up twofold in comparison to Kasumi's slight redness.

“You sound like someone who’d claim they have a killer poker face when they really don’t, and in your case, Kuroya, you’ve got more than your fair share of tells,” she said.

I feel like I’m being insulted over here, he thought while fighting the urge to shout in denial. *I’m pretty good at it when I’m with other people, mind you! You’re the only one that I get this worked up in front of. I obviously can’t tell her that, though.*

“Hey, Kuroya. What’s the part you like most about me?” she pressed him further, disregarding Soukichi’s inner turmoil.

“No comment,” he stated.

“You whaaa? Come on! Tell me!”

“Loners are really simple creatures who have zero resistance against women. All it takes is one girl who’s nice to them, and we’ll be head over heels for them,” he curtly replied.

“Uhh, what?” she asked with a forced smile, clearly flustered.

“Wh-What about you, Shiramori?” he elected to go on the offensive, having had enough of being teased. “What do you like the most... about me?”

“Hmm? Lemme think... The fact that you love me to bits,” she answered.

“Ugh?!” he cried out. Soukichi’s attack had been turned against him, killing him in an instant. It was such a perfect counter from Kasumi that it made him regret that he’d ever thought of attempting to fight back against her.

“The fact that you love me lots,” she repeated.

“Y-You don’t have to repeat it. I heard you the first timeI...” he said. *It’s a lost cause. I can never win against her. Ever!*

“Oh, by the way,” Kasumi changed the subject, taking no notice of Soukichi as he suffered immensely from a combination of embarrassment and pain over his defeat, “Are you planning on telling people about our relationship or not?”

“Huh?”

“You’ve told Shimokura about us, right? Does anybody else know?” she asked.

“No. Only Tokiya knows so far.”

“Hmmm. So that’s how it is.”

“W-Was I not supposed to tell him?”

“No, it’s not about that. It’s just something I wanted to discuss with you before we go through with anything, that’s all,” she said. “I haven’t told anybody myself, but I was wondering, would you prefer if we went all out and made it known to everyone, or if we continued dating on the down-low?”

“I know this is coming from someone who pretty much immediately spilled the beans to my friend, and I don’t exactly feel great saying this... but I would like it if we went with the latter,” he suggested. *There’s no way in hell we’re going public with our relationship. There’s too much of a risk that everyone in the school will get on my case if they found out that a loner like me is dating one of the “Four Heavenly Beauties.” I gotta avoid attracting any kind of bad attention by any means possible.*

“Mhmm, I see,” she responded.

“How about you?” he inquired.

“Probably the latter, too, I think. Not because I want to keep it hush-hush or anything, but publicizing it just doesn’t sit right with me. Besides,” she explained, cracking yet another mischievous smile, “everyone will eventually catch wind of it even if we keep it between us, and until then, I want to enjoy our secret relationship to the fullest!”

Look at her, saying such insanely adorable stuff, he thought.

“But then again, we might get found out faster than we may think. One look in your eyes, and the jig is up,” she added.

“Rude. How exactly are my eyes gonna tell anyone anything?” he asked.

“Huh? Easily, actually. You do remember that our relationship *is based* because I figured out that you liked me just by looking at you to begin with, right?”

Can’t really argue with her on that. Now that I think about it, Tokiya pretty much found out about it the same way, he pondered. *Just how bad am I at hiding my feelings?!*

“You got busted by the only person you were hoping not to reveal it to—me,” she stated.

“N-No need to spell it out so plainly.”

“He-he-he. Oh, actually. I just had a wonderful idea,” she chuckled, then stood up from her seat. “How about we do a little practice for the future?”

“Practice? For what?” he questioned.

“Practice to get you more used to being around me, Kuroya. The kind that’d make you freaked-out and panicky over every tiny thing, but will eventually get you to be more composed when we’re together,” she proposed.

“Wh-What are you gonna do to me?” he asked, preparing himself for the worst.

“We’re going on a date,” she proclaimed with a smile. The first thing that came to Soukichi’s mind was the sort of date where the couple would meet up on their day off to go spend the day somewhere. However, what Kasumi had in mind was slightly different from what he’d expected.

"...We're only going home together, and you're still going to call it a date?" he questioned.

"Don't be like that! This is a proper date, too! An after-school date," she protested as she and Soukichi, who was pushing his bike along, walked in the direction of the train station. Normally, they parted at the bicycle parking and headed their own way. This, then, was their first time walking outside the school together.

"Umm, Shiramori? Don't you think this is... quite contradictory on your part?" he asked.

"Hm? How so?"

"You suggested we do this because I'm easy to read and there's a chance that people might discover we're in a relationship, but aren't we just negating the whole thing if we're purposely standing out like this?" he added. *Frankly, I don't feel too great about this. What if somebody sees us together along the way?*

"Hmm, I think we'll be fine. We can just use an off-handed excuse that we're doing some shopping as members of the Literature Circle if somebody were to see us. Plus, as I told you before, I wouldn't mind too much if somebody found out about us."

"That *is* pretty off-handed..."

"I'm hearing a lot of complaining, but I'd say that you're pretty happy about our little after-school date," she said.

"...Am not," he denied.

"Uh-oh, someone isn't being honest!" she snickered. Soukichi was then pushed by his senior to head to the station, which she used for her daily commute to school, with her. It was right around when they took a turn at the intersection and began walking down a rather deserted street when Kasumi closed the distance between her and Soukichi and said in a teasing voice, "Hey, Kuroya. Wanna hold hands?"

"WHA—" an odd scream escaped from his throat. He was so taken aback that he stopped dead in his tracks, even. "D-Do you realize what you're saying?!"

"Hm? What's wrong? I don't think it's that big of a deal."

"Why would we do something as shameless as holding hands in public?!"

"Shameless is a bit much, don't you think?"

Okay, maybe she's right on that one. Calling simple hand-holding "shameless" is definitely a sign that I'm the one who needs to get my head out of the gutter, he thought.

"Pfftt, haha! No need to get so fidgety about it. It's not like a little hand contact killed anybody."

“C-Cut me some slack, would you? For loners like me, this is a pretty major event...”

“Come on, you can’t freak out that much over holding hands. We’re dating, remember? There are many... *other* places that you should be touching, too.”

Huh? Did she just say... other places? he murmured. With that one sentence, Soukichi found himself in a whole new world of various fantasies. He unintentionally started eyeing up Kasumi’s body, his gaze fixating on two particularly... protruding parts of her.

“Whoa, you were thinking of something indecent just now, weren’t you?” she asked. It turned out that everything had been a trap set up by Kasumi. “Didn’t take you as someone who had a dirty mind, Kuroya.”

“Wha?! A-All men are dirty-minded, I’ll have you know!” was all he could shout, sounding exactly like a sore loser in the process.

“So what do you say?” she inquired with a triumphant grin as she raised one of her hands. She further opened and closed it repeatedly, as if to provoke him. “Are we gonna hold hands?”

“...No,” he answered. *Even I have my limits. She’s been the one in total control of the situation, but enough is enough. I won’t be dragged along by her whims any more... Being honest, though, of course I wanna hold hands. I wanna do it so badly! He thought to himself.*

Soukichi was eventually able to contain his carnal desires through sheer willpower and his pride as a man, then made a gallant effort at assuming a collected demeanor. “Well, if you really insist on holding hands with me... then I guess it’s okay,” he said in a condescending tone, desperately trying his best to take over the flow of the conversation.

“Hmmm? Really now?” she eloquently nodded before swiftly reducing the distance between them once more. This had Soukichi stunned, his whole having frozen in place. Kasumi grabbed onto his hand, which had been supporting one of his bike handles, and held it with no hesitation. She gently tugged on it and clasped it tightly, leaving his bike to tip over onto the ground—that was, until he instinctively prevented that from happening with his other hand.

He thus had difficulty keeping his attention on the hand Kasumi was holding, as a result, meaning that Kasumi was free to do whatever she wanted with it. She interlocked her fingers with his soon after, and they were now holding hands like a true couple.

“Hehe, look at us holding hands,” she cooed with unbridled joy.

“Huh...? Umm, What? -W-What in the world are you doing, Shiramori?”

“Hmm? You said it was okay, remember?” she reminded him. Soukichi’s heart began racing a mile a minute. His blood felt like it was on fire at this point, it all rushing to his head, making him unable to think straight.

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“I really wanted to do this with you,” she added.

“Gah?!”

“It just had to be today, seeing as it’s our... first ever after-school date and all,” she explained.

“I-I get it! You don’t have to keep talking!” he frantically begged her to stop.

“He-he-he. Now that’s what I call a one-hit kill!” she exclaimed, her eyes exuding arrogance.

A one-hit kill? What is she even talking about, he contemplated. *Does that mean that she was being serious when she said that? Thinking back on it, it did feel like we took a detour onto a road that had virtually no people in sight. Did she bring me here with the intention of getting to hold hands right from the very start? Wait. It could also be that this is all a part of her plan to confuse me and get me to have false expectations,* he mulled over.

This is bad. I can’t tell what’s real and what isn’t anymore, he continued. The only thing that was, in fact, real was the sensation transmitted to him from the palm of his hand. It was his first time ever touching a girl’s hand. It was soft and warm, and it was enough to send a saccharine shock running through his body. It was an exceptionally blissful feeling, one that he’d never experienced before.

“Ready to admit defeat?” she asked.

“That’s just... unfair,” he said defeatedly. *It’s truly unfair how cute my girlfriend, Shiramori, is.*

Kasumi casually let go of his hand after they left the empty road and were getting closer to the station. Soukichi, however, couldn’t tell if it was because she considered the risk of coming across an acquaintance on their way there, or that she was simply too embarrassed to hold hands with him around strangers. Nevertheless, while Soukichi felt some sadness when she let go, he was genuinely more relieved than anything.

Holding hands with the person I like is just too intense for a romance newbie like me, he thought. *I felt my HP rapidly dwindling down the more time we spent doing it, like I was trudging my way through a poisoned lake in some video game level or something.*

“How about we stop by a bookstore?” she proposed.

“Sounds good to me,” he replied. After they’d settled on their next destination in less than two seconds, they left Soukichi’s bike at the bicycle parking inside the station, then headed into the bookstore located in the station building.

Bookworms could easily be recognized in public if they fulfilled one simple criteria: going into a bookstore even if they didn’t have a particular book they were looking to purchase. Soukichi and Shiramori just so

happened to meet said criteria, as they would tend to enter bookstores if they were strolling around town and wanted to kill some of their free time. It was quite fun for them to just look around the store without any specific purpose in mind, and, whether they left the store with a new book or not, they would go as far as to consider it time well-spent.

Some people would write it off as nothing but an exercise in futility, but in the eyes of a book lover, it became a time of happiness and comfort. Looking at all the various book covers was enjoyable in and of itself, and buying a book that caught one's eye on a whim made the experience all the more fun.

Seeing the layout of the bookstore these days is more of a blast than the books themselves, I've found, he thought. *I'm interested in what the staff end up putting on display, how they promote all those multimedia franchises, what they have in mind for how to get a popular novel flying off the shelves, how they set up the handwritten signs in the special corners in the store, and so on...*

Tokiya always dismissed all of the above by saying that Soukichi was just an eccentric oddball . Luckily for him, however, the person who was currently standing next to him was Kasumi, someone who adored books to the same degree that he did and someone who was also filled with admiration toward bookstores and their staff alike.

"Oh, look at this one here. It's got a paperback edition. Whoa, the cover is amazing!" she commented.

"I agree. Compared to the hardcover art, it definitely has a certain charm to it," he said.

"Hmmm, I'm really torn. Should I buy this edition of the book or not I mean, this author tends to go hard on fixing some of the material. And it doesn't just extend to simple revision. Sometimes whole lines are changed altogether."

"That must confuse fans more than anything, huh? Both versions can be enjoyed in their own right, and you could even view each of them as taking place in a parallel universe, but I bet people would really appreciate it if the author came out and clarified which version is canon."

"Hmm. I think I'll hold off on getting it for today, then. Ah, look over here! This one's getting an anime adaptation real soon. I've been interested in it for a while now," she said.

"Oh, I already read it," Soukichi revealed.

"What? No way! How was it?"

"Well, personally I think that—"

“You know what? I changed my mind! I don’t wanna hear it! Don’t even tell me if it was fun or boring either, okay? I want to go in blind!” she interrupted.

“If you say so. I’ll bring you the book with me tomorrow, in any case.”

“Thanks in advance!” she exclaimed.

Haah, this is what it’s all about, he thought. *It’s so fun and relaxing.*

Their relationship had only started the day before yesterday, and while Soukichi had been over the moon from that day onward, it’d also chipped away at his sanity a considerable amount. He even felt somewhat isolated these past two days.

It feels pretty sad, being like this when I’ve just gotten a girlfriend, but I can’t help how I feel, he pondered. There were a great many variables and uncharted territory for a romance novice like Soukichi. He was always on-edge when playing the game of “love,” since he knew nothing about the rules, nor the theories involved.

Still, he felt right at home when he was in the bookstore talking about books and such. It was comforting to him, as though he were back home in his own living room, playing a game he was very much familiar with.

Maybe that’s how life was for me before we started dating, he thought. *All we did was talk about books and other random things that didn’t matter. Obviously I don’t regret going out with Kasumi in the slightest. I guess I just kinda miss the dynamic we had before.*

Soukichi had finally calmed himself down, though his peace of mind wasn’t going to last for long, unfortunately.

“Take a look at this, Kuroya. They’re calling it a ‘Teenage-Series Fair,’” she said as she pointed at one of the special corners set up in the store.

Right underneath the handwritten sign—which was written in a catchy modern font—were a countless number of books on display. The covers of the books in question had a general adolescent feel to them and came in a wide variety of designs, such as the main heroine as the centerpiece for some of the light novels, characters looking up at the clouds for the more character-driven works, and even a simple sky drawing for the general literature.

“There’s nothing more ambiguous in the world of novels than when the word ‘teenage’ is involved. I can’t help but feel it’s some surface-level concept added in only because the main character of the story is in their ‘adolescent’ years just to rake in more sales,” he ranted. “The one that makes the least sense to me is the term ‘teenage romance.’ It feels redundant somewhat, like saying ‘I’m the best genre for real, no cap.’ They could be right, for all I know, but it all still reeks of a sly editorial trick that companies use just to make it sound like it’s better quality.”

“Yup, there’s the contrarian I know,” she joked with a forced smile, looking somewhat dumbfounded. She then took a sweeping look at all the books on offer, one by one, much like an innocent child at an all-you-can-eat buffet.

“...Ugh!” he groaned, his face suddenly tensing up. Kasumi was looking at a certain book placed in the corner, and Soukichi followed her stare. He stopped breathing for a moment, and he felt his body getting colder, like something was sucking all of the warmth from him. *Huh. I didn’t expect to see it here of all places.*

Soukichi had assumed that this book had outlived its days of being displayed face-up in a store. It was released a few years ago and wasn’t exactly a hit, nor was it adapted into other mediums of entertainment. They’d most likely dragged it out of the store’s inventory to fill the Teenage-Series Fair quota.

The book was essentially a “teenage” novel that was ladened with a lack of anything to make it stand out, only using that label for the hell of it. The title of said book was “You’re the Ray of White Light in my Darksome World.”

It was a cheesy, substandard title, using the words “You” and “World” as means to make it sound like it was a best-seller and to have it cater to an adolescent audience. The book was the debut work of a certain author, a debut work that had flopped in comical fashion, and that certain author hadn’t released another book to this very day.

“K-Kuroya?” Kasumi called out in an unnerved voice, her expression showing her pronounced anxiety.

“...I’m okay,” Soukichi replied in such a calm manner that he even surprised himself. He then reached out and grabbed the book in question. Its cover consisted mostly of scenery, with a girl and a guy drawn in the corner.

It’s been a while since I’ve had a good look at this cover, he thought. In the past, just a single glance at it was enough to make him miserable, veritably tainting the world around him in pitch-black darkness. Yet now, he was strangely unaffected.

“I’m all okay now,” Soukichi repeated, which brought about a deep sigh of relief from Kasumi. Soukichi recalled how Tokiya had a similar reaction when the topic cropped up. *I guess they’ve both been extremely thoughtful to not bring it up around me. Holy shit, I really am just the most pathetic person walking the Earth, aren’t I?. Was my past self really that sensitive?*

Soukichi again, shifted his gaze downwards at the book in hand. The author’s name was laid out at the corner—Soukichi Kuroya, it read. It was the one and only novel he had written, having done it while he was still in

middle school. It wasn't self-published either; rather, it had been his debut work as a genuine professional writer.

Chapter Five

Passion Reignited

Soukichi regretted countless things from his time in middle school, so much that coming up with something he *didn't* regret proved quite the challenge. One example of such came in the form of picking his real name, Soukichi Kuroya, as his pen name.

There wasn't a specific reason behind my choice, he thought, *but I'd be lying if I said that I wasn't holding out hope that a self-assertive and boring, yet extremely middle-school student like me would finally receive some attention from my classmates. I thought that I'd become one of the most popular kids in my class if my book were a hit.*

The book failed miserably in the end, however. Soukichi would've been able to leave his past behind him, even sort out his assorted feelings easily had he put the tiniest amount of effort into coming up with a pen name, but alas, that wasn't the case. That option was no longer afforded to him due to his mistake, doomed to be haunted by his past failures each time he wrote his name down, unable to shake off the lingering fragments of his failed dream.

•

Soukichi reflected on the events that transpired a little while ago, back when only three months had passed since he met Kasumi.

"He-he-he. I've been waiting for you, Kuroya," she opened as soon as he entered the room. She was in an especially good mood today, as evident by her cheerful tone and her exhilarated smile.

"Did something good happen?" he asked.

"Ta-da!" she exclaimed and showed him a certain book with the title "You're the Ray of White Light in my Darksome World." It was his debut work. Soukichi's face instantly turned pale the moment he laid eyes on the cover. "This is your book, right?"

"..."

"I was super surprised when I found out! It's the first thing that shows up when I search your name online, too!" she added. "Remember that one time when you briefly mentioned writing something of your own? Not gonna lie, I was more expecting a web novel or something, but wow. I never would've imagined you were actually a legit author. Sheesh, why haven't you told me about it until now?!"

"..."

“You’re so amazing, Kuroya! Gosh, and to think a professional writer was sitting this close to me all this time. Don’t forget to sign my copy later, okay? Oh, forgot to mention this, but I obviously finished reading yesterday, and it was really interesting!” she enthusiastically admired, though most of those words of praise never entered Soukichi’s head. He was preoccupied with his breathing, like he had forgotten how to draw breaths altogether. He then fell to his knees, almost prostrated on the floor. “Huh? K-Kuroya?! What’s wrong? Ah! You look like you’ve just seen a ghost. Are you okay?”

“...N-Never been better,” he feverishly answered in an attempt to pretend that nothing was the matter. An amalgamation of dark, melancholic emotions pierced deep into his heart, and a feeling of disgrace slowly began to consume him. *The one person I didn’t want to find out about my hidden past now knows... I really shouldn’t have used my real name.*

•

The dream of wanting to become a novelist was simply a natural progression of Soukichi’s life. It was what any kid who was a bookworm typically had in mind for a career path. He was always the child that preferred staying indoors and reading a book instead of enjoying some fresh air and, as such, naturally developed the desire to create his own stories.

Soukichi eventually received a used laptop from his parents once he entered middle school, which allowed him to start pursuing his dreams. He then posted whatever he came up with on a major company’s novel-sharing website.

Becoming a professional writer and releasing a debut work was an idea that had crossed his mind a fair few times. Still, that was nothing more than a dream at that point in time, a labile aspiration which could hardly be referred to as a proper career plan; it was more akin to one fantasizing about the chance arising than anything.

His middle-school days of being absorbed amateur writing would rage on, with his perspective on the matter continuing to teeter between being a dream he actively wanted to pursue and a mere hobby... That was, until one of his works had begun to garner itself some popularity, that being “You’re the Ray of White Light in my Darksome World.”

The title alone reeled in so many views it was essentially incomparable to the other works he had posted before. It had even found its way onto a respectable spot on the site’s ranking board.

“What say you publish this work of yours with our company?” a message from a publisher offering to produce a novelization of his work came soon after.

It felt like I was in a dream, he pondered. *Never in my life could I have predicted that my wish would come true that quickly.*

Soukichi had a vague plan to use the site to hone his writing skills and build up his confidence enough to apply for a rookie award one day. So the news of the publisher approaching him instead of the other way around had been an unforeseen scenario for him, to put it lightly.

"I really gotta give it to you, Mr. Kuroya. 'You're the Ray of White Light in my Darksome World' is crazy fun to read! And you're only a middle schooler, you tell me? You must be some sort of prodigy! I am truly honored that I'll be supervising a gifted boy such as yourself!" Atsugi, the editor of the publishing company, praised.

Atsugi was a grown man in his mid-thirties or, in other words, a stranger that was fairly difficult to speak with from a middle-school student's point of view. However, Atsugi was friendly, and because of that, Soukichi was able to communicate with him quite well.

"The dialogue between the protagonist and the main heroine is superb. Your style really shines in line deliveries and sentence structure. It makes reading the story that much more engrossing. You're an absolute genius," Atsugi commended. Soukichi's usually conversed with him via email or phone due to Soukichi living in the Tohoku region—the northeast portion of Japan.

Soukichi's initially had the image of editors as being people who were hypercritical when looking over whatever work was presented to them, while constantly asking for tweaks and adjustments to the text. However, this couldn't be further from the truth, as Atsugi continued to shower his work with affirmations; he hadn't even critiqued it once.

Atsugi even showed Soukichi ample respect, referring to him as "Mr." and all that. Soukichi, at the time, was delighted by all the compliments he was given by him. He knew that some of it was just your usual pleasantries, but the fact that a professional editor was so approving of his work mattered more to him than anything else.

Still, it wasn't like I was content with everything, he pondered. *I guess I'd more call it a nagging doubt that kept lingering in the back of my mind...*

"Revising your book? I'd say that's unnecessary. Your writing is already a perfectly complete piece that requires no adjustments whatsoever. Besides, the original fans that have been following you ever since the web series might end up disappointed if you made any crude changes with the manuscript for the novelisation."

Oh, the illustrator for the book? I'll take care of that. I already have my eyes on someone. You want to... request a specific one? I mean, nobody's stopping you from doing that. But do be aware that the illustrators new

authors suggest tend to be the ones that are always in high demand, which can cause the pace at which the publication is going at to be less stable overall."

We're the professionals here, so let us worry about how the book should be packaged. What you should be doing at the moment is focusing on the web serialization. The amount of activity surrounding your work on the site could be the key difference in the amount of sales the book gets. Also, please don't forget to frequently update the fans on what you're doing, and we would greatly appreciate it if you could make an effort to advertise the novelisation. Oh yeah, don't forget to set up the pre-order banner either. That's very important," such were the instructions Atsugi gave out to Soukichi, that of which he followed to a tee.

The work needed to publish the book was going swimmingly. Soukichi left the nitty-gritty details of packaging and such in Atsugi's hands and concentrated solely on refreshing the novel's webpage without putting any effort into making any modifications to the book's text. He was also immensely dedicated to posting regular updates, and quite aggressively too—something he had never done before—in order to secure the engagement of the readers.

The arrangements of publishing Soukichi's book thus continued without his involvement in it. He did think it was unusual, but since he had no experience with editors or editorial departments, he figured this was the normal approach for all releases.

And in the blink of an eye, time had completely passed by Soukichi. The date for his debut work to be released had finally arrived, and... it flopped in comical fashion, which led to the series being suspended due to having not met the selling quota. The news came to him soon after, about one week after the release.

"I'd like to offer my sincerest apologies for my incompetence, but we cannot continue to produce any more volumes with how the novel is selling currently," Atsugi explained to Soukichi on the phone.

I was shocked, obviously, but not as much as I thought I'd be, Soukichi thought. *Honestly, I felt so motivated I could scream that it didn't matter too much and then go and focus on my next thing. Of course, I wouldn't have complained if my debut work sold like hot cakes and became a massive hit, but this is the real world.*

I was pretty down that it got axed, but it wasn't like I could keep dwelling it, he added. *It felt like it wasn't a big deal. After all, there are a great number of authors who fluffed their debut work, but followed it up with a big hit and redeemed themselves. My life as an author had only just gotten underway. I*

had faith that I would bounce back. I was a prodigy, after all. And my work had been approved so much by a professional editor...

"...I understand," Soukichi said. "I suppose we can't do anything about that."

"I'm terribly sorry once again," Atsugi replied.

"Umm, so about my next work..."

"Oh, yes. It's best to get back on your feet and set your eyes on the future."

"Yes, I assure you that I will do my best!"

"Wonderful," Atsugi said in his usual cheerful tone, then naturally continued, "I will be in contact with you again when a web novel of yours attracts our attention."

Wha...? Soukichi questioned.

"Now then, I wish you luck in your future endeavors," Atsugi hung up the phone while Soukichi was still at a loss for words.

Soukichi hadn't heard a word from Atsugi ever since. He sent him the plotline of some stories he had thought up from time to time, but the only reply he got was to post them on the novel-sharing website to see what reception it got, without Atsugi offering any substantial impressions on them.

That's when I knew something wasn't right, he thought. *Then I started asking myself, "was this what it's like to be an author? What it's like to be a pro? Wasn't I supposed to be... a genius?"*

"Atsugi, huh... He's the kind of editor that doesn't actually do any editing in the slightest. It's all about the numbers when it comes to him. Some people really have it out for him because of that," a seasoned author that went by the pen name Reiku Umikawa explained. Soukichi had been at a party held by the publishing company at the time and asked a veteran in the industry for advice as a last resort. That was the reply he'd received.

Reiku was an old-timer who had been writing for 10 years for multiple publishing companies. He didn't just settle on writing novels, but also dipped into a wide range of works such as manga and video game scenarios. He had acquaintances in various publishing firms and gaming studios alike, and his connections reached as far as the business side of things, as well.

"He's infamously known for not touching the manuscripts authors send his way and opts to immediately push for their publication. You then see him spewing out empty compliments at the authors left, right, and center, to top it all off. He'll call them all 'geniuses' or say that they have 'a great style of writing.' It's easier on you as an editor if you don't go about changing anything, after all."

Novelizing works that were posted on novel-sharing websites was apparently the latest fad in the current publishing scene, according to Reiku, so much so that it had given rise to a new phenomenon of publishing companies competing heatedly over scouting the next big thing.

It had gotten so intense that they had basically plucked all the most popular works off the market and had already published them as proper book series, Soukichi thought. And so some editors had elected to shift their strategy to focusing on harvesting promising young talents. Now that the cream of the crop had been all been snatched up, reaping blooming, unripened talent was logically the next order of business.

Those editors disregarded the fact that the inexperienced authors didn't have many works to their name and how they were still building up their reputation with their future uncertain. All they cared about was getting in touch with those promising authors the moment they produced anything that caught steam and pinning them down so that other labels couldn't contact them.

"Atsugi has been keeping himself busy ever since he got a taste of web serializations. He'd just look at the top rankings on the site, approach their authors one after the other, then fast track them into publishing without improving the original work. He's published a good amount of web novels at a rapid pace by now, and it has yielded him good results," Reiku further clarified, then added in a tone reeking of disgust, "It's the ideal job for Atsugi, really, especially with the whole not having to adjust the manuscript thing."

I'm personally not a fan of his approach, but then again, I can't say that it's all bad. Some authors tend to thrive in that system, surprisingly enough," Reiku continued. "It's a smoother editorial process for actual genius authors who can write up a perfect manuscript that doesn't require any fixes right from their very first draft. Because for them, those kinds of editors stroke their ego with all their flattery, and they are left to write whatever they want."

He was right, Soukichi mulled. *For example, there was another author that Atsugi talked with whose works were released in the same month as mine. That one got to be reprinted immediately following its great sales, so it really could work well for some people.*

But above all else, him being constantly called a genius felt very good to him; it was like he was being placed on a pedestal. And it was because he had accepted the praise at face value that Soukichi was able to think of himself as a genuine prodigy.

Authors who can produce a completed manuscript were unlikely to have many issues, even with an editor like him in charge, he thought. *It wouldn't matter for real prodigious writers...*

"I'll be straight with you, Kuroya," Reiku said. "Your work is below industry standard," he quickly followed with a blunt declaration. Reiku laid out his honest thoughts with determination and clarity, something Atsugi would never dare do.

"Again, it isn't your fault, Kuroya. You've done more than enough, considering you're still in middle school. All the blame falls on Atsugi who presented the raw manuscript for the consumers without so much as changing it in any way," Reiku reassured. "How can you even call yourself an editor at that point, anyway? Those hacks who think they can just copy-paste the web novel onto a book and jump ship when it doesn't work out are the true scum of this industry. Besides, why even approach an author if you had no intention of looking after them and their work to begin with?"

Reiku's words, however, fell into deaf ears around halfway through his rant. Soukichi knew that Reiku's honesty came from a good place and that he was just trying to look out for him. Reiku even stood up for him, making a point to him that the editors were responsible for his predicament. Yet it hadn't roused any resentment in Soukichi's soul towards the editor in charge. His heart was instead occupied with pity directed at himself.

I had no talent from the very start, Soukichi concluded. He'd come to the realization that he was ultimately one of many others the editor had haphazardly spoken to in order to jump on the web novel serialization bandwagon. *His tactic was to practically throw a bunch of prospects against the wall to see what sticks, and I wasn't one of the ones that stuck*

What Atsugi had wanted was a novel that had gained a following, with no regards to who wrote it. He didn't care about its contents either, just so long as it had the added value of being trendy. In other words, he hadn't the slightest interest in Soukichi's ability or general competence as an author. He had no expectations either and just sang it in faux praise. That's why he was able to so effortlessly cut Soukichi loose when the results didn't turn up

Then you have me, taking all of his bullshit to heart he mocked. *I took myself for a genius when that couldn't have been further from the case.*

Soukichi hated himself for being so ludicrously naive. He had been under the impression that his dream came true as a product of his own skill and talent, and as a result, he felt so incredibly pathetic, so miserable, so ashamed after being confronted with the reality of the situation.

Snap, a sound of something cracking rang out from deep within him. And so it was; from that day onward, he had entirely given up on writing. The abrupt absence of new updates on his page—after all of his constant

activity before—had drawn concerns amidst his readers, and many of them voiced their concern in the comment section.

Many people were worried for my physical and mental health back then, Soukichi thought. *Some even talked earnestly about how much they liked my story... but I couldn't find it in myself to believe them.*

Soukichi's heart was plunged further and further into a sea of darkness with each appraisal, and comforting comment that was posted. No matter what encouragement he received, he would be reminded of what Atsugi said over the phone that time, causing him to be skeptical of every little remark.

This, in turn, sparked a strong aversion inside of Soukichi toward his fans, resulting in him being unable to accept their appreciation when he should have been appreciative of them instead. Just reading those comments made him feel nauseous. He grew doubtful of not only his work's quality, but of the people who complimented how engaging it was, as well. It eventually reached the point where he forgot why he'd even begun writing novels to begin with.

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"So that's... what happened," Kasumi said in a pained expression after Soukichi finished telling his story. He had been sitting in a chair in the meantime, drinking out of the bottled tea she bought him. He had initially become short of breath whenever he laid eyes on the cover of his debut work, but he had since been able to recover from it. "I'm really sorry, Kuroya. I should've known better not to say something so insensitive."

"...It's not your fault. Everything that happened to me, I deserve all of it," he said in such a hoarse voice. "I genuinely believe that. I got too cocky, thinking that I had single-handedly achieved my dream career when I wasn't even close to talented enough to maintain it."

He felt a weight forming in the pit of his stomach with each word uttered. Nevertheless, the endless self-torment and self-deprecation would only continue to persist.

"I also caused my parents a lot of headaches. I made such a big deal of having my work debut, only to have nothing to show for it. Next thing I knew, I was skipping school and shutting myself in my room," he added. "I did manage to not repeat a year, but it was at the cost of my parents receiving constant calls from my school. All I do is be a major nuisance to them... I really am the worst."

Although Soukichi was never the type to brag, he was intelligent enough to land him a consistent spot in the top three of his class each year. His

original first choice of high school was the most high ranking one in his prefecture, too.

But as a consequence of the exhausting effort he had put into his novel, his grades took a substantial drop, and he received a poor evaluation on his school report due to the amount of unexcused absences to match. He subsequently had to settle for a less prestigious high school, which ended up being Midoriba High.

"It was all... just a massive waste," Soukichi declared, attempting to rid himself of his past.

"A waste?" she parroted.

"Yes, a waste. A waste of time, of my life, everything. It was all because I had that stupid dream, that I was gulliable enough to assume had come true for me. I... I..." he stumbled. *I drowned in my dream, got manipulated by it, then tasted humiliation because of it. I wish I hadn't ever had that dream. I wish I never wrote novels in the first place. If only I could go back in time and stop myself, then I would've never had to deal with this much pain.*

"I wish I never wrote a single novel! I wish I never had this moronic ambition of becoming a writer! All of it, the whole thing, was a waste!" he yelled.

"It wasn't a waste, Kuroya," Kasumi said in a restrained tone, taking care to mince her words. Still, she stared directly at Soukichi, then continued, "Writing that novel wasn't a waste."

"...How so?" he questioned.

"Umm, well, I can't really comment on it being a waste of your life or anything like that. That's for you to decide. But what I can say is that from how I see it, it wasn't a waste."

"..."

"It can't have been a waste. Because I..." she paused briefly, wearing a faint smile with a curious expression to match. She then took hold of Soukichi's book and lovingly caressed it while saying, "...had loads of fun reading your novel."

"I don't need any of your hollow words!" he objected. She'd managed to ruffle his feathers more than anything, and he was once again, unable to allow his heart to accept her words. He rejected them, much like a body reacting to a foreign pathogen.

"There's no way you genuinely enjoyed reading this sorry excuse of a novel! It's just some trash that got popular on the internet by sheer coincidence. It can hardly be considered mediocre or average, let alone something a professional writer would release," he spewed. "Putting a piece of shit like this out to the world was all just one big mistake."

The dam had been breached, and the words were now flowing out one by one. It was ironic, in a twisted way; Soukichi, who had always gotten tongue tied in front of people, was eloquent when it came to degrading himself with insults.

"The editor in charge of me never meant any of the compliments he gave me, and an acquaintance writer straight up told me that it wasn't even industry standard," he explained. "The ratings don't get better online either. Did you know that it got torn to pieces? How it was critiqued for the writing being horrible, having a boring story, and generally being self-serving. So please, don't you come praising this junk with your surface-level comments!"

Soukichi was so sensitive to any words of admiration for his book that even *he* found it absurd. He remembered looking himself up on the internet after its release, where, save for the odd positive one here and there, he was bombarded with negative reviews all over his search engine.

There were a handful of people who backed me up, people that supported me due to me posting stuff online and gave me words of encouragement that I don't even deserve, he thought. Alas, all of that was something he wished to distance himself from, and nothing more.

"It must be real easy to compliment someone. All it takes is some words which sound good enough, and you're sorted. Everyone gets on your case if you go about lambasting something half-heartedly, but nobody complains about your everyday flattery," he argued. *That's how I was when I bought whatever Atsugi was filling my head with hook, line, and sinker.*

He felt his heart, slowly but surely, getting corrupted by a vicious entity. Soukichi—who had been through such a traumatic experience because of the cheap exaltation of his editor—could no longer trust any praise for his work. It wouldn't matter how positive it was; the only emotions stirred within him while reading them were anger and fear.

I just can't trust anything anymore, he decided. *I can't trust the people who give me compliments, but more importantly, I don't trust my own ability, or the things I've written more than anyone else...*

"I read through the whole thing myself, and if I were to judge it objectively, I'd say it's boring as hell. It's nothing more than some worthless rubbish that a middle schooler who was full of himself wrote—"

"Stop it right now!" her commanding voice, which could almost be considered a shriek, interrupted him. She then grabbed his cheeks with both hands and forcibly lifted his head up; their gazes interlocked with one another. Kasumi stared at him with honest eyes that held within them an unbridled fury. "I won't let you insult a work I love any more than you already have."

“A work you... love?” he dwelled.

“You heard me. I had a lot of fun reading it.”

“I just said you can keep the flattery—”

“I’m not trying to butter you up, Kuroya. I do lie to people sometimes, but I would never lie about how I feel about books,” she declared with an arresting tone, leaving no room for rebuttal. “What decides if a book is enjoyable for me or not is... well, me. I don’t care if the pros in the industry tore it to pieces, or if it got trampled to death by bad reviews on the internet, or if the author himself hates it. If I had a good experience with it overall, then that’s all that matters.”

“...”

In a sense, what Kasumi had just said was the truth, plain and simple. It was all too obvious, even; the only one capable of judging if a book was entertaining to read was you and you alone. If the readers of a certain book determined that the book they read was uninteresting, it’d be written off as a “disaster,” no matter how much the author themselves believed it was a “masterpiece.”

That logic applied seamlessly to the other side of the coin, as well. If the reader deemed the work to be quite engaging, then they’d rate it as a “great read,” regardless of whether or not the author thought it was a “failure,” a “flop,” or something they would rather forget they ever wrote.

“Your novel was pretty fun, Kuroya,” she insisted and flashed a flustered smile. “And I’m not just saying that to make you feel better. It was honestly really good, and the thought that my own adorable junior was able to write something so brilliant filled me with pride and happiness.”

I’m not gonna tell you that it’s the greatest thing since sliced bread, or that it was the best thing I’ve ever read, because that isn’t the case,” she clarified. “There were a lot of parts that I thought were shoddy and could’ve used some work, and I do understand where some people are coming from when they roast it. It’s hard to recommend this book to other people, to be frank. But even then, I do personally like it, and when it was all said and done, I’m glad I read it. I guess it just suited my overall tastes.”

“It... did?” he asked.

“That’s what reading’s all about. Sometimes, you find yourself unable to get into a book that has sold millions upon millions of copies, then you have that one you thought was great be canceled after only one volume because it didn’t sell enough,” she pointed out. “What I’m trying to say is that your writing style kinda jives with me. That’s why... I became a fan of the writer known as Soukichi Kuroya.”

“...Ugh,” he groaned, Kasumi’s long speech having left him feeling embarrassed.

The possibility that she could be saying all this because she was worried about him had occurred to him, something along the lines of providing whatever words of encouragement she could come up with for her depressed, annoying junior. In spite of all of that, however...

I think I... believe her. She sounds like she's being sincere here, he contemplated. Soukichi, for whatever reason, had faith that she was telling the truth. The words she spoke right to his very face were undeniably convincing. Soukichi, who had developed an allergic reaction to any commendation of his work since what had happened with Atsugi, was now finally able to gratefully accept it all.

Kasumi's words sank deep into the darkest depths of his heart and, with their radiance, gently began melting away the shadowy being that had seized his heart and put immense stress upon it.

"I know I may sound like a reader that can't create anything of note, but still arrogantly speaks her mind like I'm levels above you," she said. "I can't even imagine what kind of despair and suffering you must've gone through, let alone sympathize with it. I don't even know how I can help you. That's why I want you to let me do the one thing that I *can* do, and that is to tell you my opinion on your novel."

Kasumi's hand then clasped his, and she looked straight at Soukichi. The way they were sitting resembled that of a fan eagerly attending their beloved author's book signing event.

"I enjoyed reading your book, and I'll always support you, so keep it up. Please take good care of yourself, and I look forward to whatever comes next!" Her best wishes were pretty much exactly what someone typically used online when sending one's thoughts to an author.

You see that saying a fair amount in the comments section of any novel-sharing site or on social media, he thought. *Even I have received that message more times than I can count.*

It was a common comment of support that could be found anywhere for dirt cheap, practically, and it was that exact same comment, which had virtually become a template by this point, that Soukichi had been unable to buy since his experience with the editor. And yet those same exact words touched his heart to the point that he found himself becoming emotional. He was so heartstruck, so deeply moved, that tears began pouring down from his eyes, with no signs of stopping anytime soon.

Ah, I remember it all now. I was happy, so unbelievably happy when my work got its first positive feedback, he reminisced. *Seeing all those people who supported me and told me that they had fun reading my work gave me a sense of fulfillment. It made me so proud of myself that I felt like it justified my very existence.*

There was a light, a dazzling ray of white light that shone down on his melancholic heart and upon the road he'd ventured to fulfill his dream—the one lying buried under layers of depression and shame, almost tossed away after having been deemed meaningless. That same faint, yet reassuring light illuminated Soukichi's darksome world, which had been doleful and devoid of all color, and reverted everything back to its former vibrant glory.

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Soukichi had now returned to reality after the lengthy recollection of his dreary past. He had returned home from his little date with Kasumi, finished his dinner, and was in his room on the second floor, his focus all on the work he was doing on his laptop. That was when his phone rang, and when he saw who was calling him, he unintentionally tensed up.

Soukichi then took a deep breath before answering the call, “Hello, Kuroya here,” he said.

“Good evening, Kuroya,” the caller, Reiku, greeted. Reiku was essentially the sole acquaintance Soukichi knew from the industry nowadays. “Are you free right now?”

“Yes, it’s fine,” Soukichi answered.

“I gotta apologize first for being so late with my reply and all. I’m sort of the scenario director for this one game, and I had some problems I needed to smooth over regarding that.”

“Oh no, don’t worry about it. I know how busy things get. Besides, I’m really grateful that you’re doing all this for me out of the kindness of your heart.”

“I appreciate you saying that, but let me tell you that this isn’t 100 percent out of goodwill. I’m also doing it because there could be something in it for me, too.”

“Alright... So how did it go?” Soukichi asked.

“I won’t waste any of your time—you pass,” Reiku plainly declared. “The first chapter of that new novel you sent me was pretty good. It’ll work perfectly for an introduction.”

Soukichi clenched his free hand in response. “Thank God,” he said as his entire body relaxed and he heaved a sigh of relief.

“Haha, nice work. It was a long road to get to this point.”

“Tell me about it,” Soukichi grumbled. “Again, I really appreciate that you took the time to look over the manuscript. I just... I never thought it’d take us half a year for the first chapter alone.”

“The introduction to your novel is the most important thing in this day and age. It’s pretty much a given that 90 percent of the works who don’t grab the reader’s attention at the start end up being a bust,” Reiku stated, as business-oriented as ever.

Exactly half a year ago—around the time the cultural festival had ended—Soukichi had returned to writing novels again with the goal of regaining his status as a professional author. He figured that he owed it to himself to truly fulfill his dream at last after it hadn’t been fully realized the first time.

Nevertheless, Soukichi couldn't bring himself to consult Atsugi about it, so he turned to the only other person that could lend a hand: Reiku Umikawa. It was a total shot in the dark for Soukichi, but Reiku thankfully was quite good-natured and agreed to look over and correct his manuscript.

That being said, getting his approval hadn't been a walk in the park for Soukichi, as Reiku had been incredibly strict with him. For example, the main plot was rejected multiple times until it finally worked for Reiku and he gave him the green light. That wasn't all, however, as Soukichi was forced to tidy up the first chapter at least a dozen times.

"It was really... tiring," Soukichi said.

"Sorry about that. I figured that being too polite wouldn't help you improve, so I decided speaking my mind would be best. I do feel like I went overboard, but that makes sense, considering I was more harsh than some actual editors out there," Reiku explained.

"It's fine. It was tiring, but also enjoyable in its own way," Soukichi replied. *It was fun. Really fun*

Soukichi and Reiku discussed the manuscript extensively and brought the ax down on any parts of the chapter they felt were stale. This made Soukichi even more determined to write a better story than he had previously, and as a result, the plot was able to transcend to a higher level through that clash of opinions, much like an intense final battle in the climax of a novel. It was precisely how Soukichi had dreamt the commercial world of being an author to be.

"Hmm... We're still not out of the woods yet, Kuroya. I've only given you the pass on the first chapter. You've still got a ways to go," Reiku cynically admonished. "Remember the promise I made to you before we started? I won't offer the work to any editors I know if you don't write up something I find up to snuff. I'm not about to vouch for your work and risk my brand out of 'kindness,'" Reiku added, "and I'd be equally as happy to introduce them to a story that'd boost my reputation."

"Yes, I understand completely. Thank you so much," Soukichi said, bowing to Reiku fully knowing he wasn't in the room. *I owe him so much, seriously.*

"I'll get you referred to a decent editorial department. It'll make things awkward for you if we went with the same company Atsugi works for, so we'll have to pick another one," Reiku said.

"I see... Umm, is it really okay for me to write for another label? Wasn't there a three-years commitment where I'm legally binded to write for the same publisher for three years after my debut?" Soukichi questioned.

"The three-years commitment thing is more of an unspoken rule that applies to new authors who've earned a prize. They don't extend to people

who originally wrote web novels. Plus, with the amount of people entering the industry from the web scene, it's become pretty much obsolete," Reiku explained.

"Uh-huh. Good to know."

"It was initially put in place because the publishing business is looking on the up. When you look at it through a different lens, saying that you 'can't write for other publishers for three years' could also mean that they'll make you write a novel in three years' time. It's a right reserved to the labels committed to overseeing a prize winner for that period of time and through all the necessary effort that comes with it," Reiku babbled.

But if we're talking about an editorial department who just wants to enforce an outdated principle on new authors because they happened to give them a chance, despite not providing them with any real motivation that'll allow them to develop as authors, then they're nothing but a crappy—oops, sorry. I ended up going on a tangent there," Reiku apologized.

"It's all good," Soukichi replied. *Hmm, still the same old Umikawa that gets heated when complaining about publishers and editorial departments. Then again, I guess it's natural to have some pent-up frustration when you've been working with them for so long.*

"Anyway. Bottom line is that we'll talk when you finish the manuscript. I want you to keep up that passion from the first chapter throughout the whole writing process. Hell, you could go further and refine the first chapter even more if you want. There's no such thing as perfection for literary works, and there isn't a defined goal for a writer either," Reiku encouraged.

"You got it!" Soukichi gave a firm nod, making sure to take Reiku's words to heart. After that, the call ended, and he found himself staring at his laptop screen, where the text editing software that contained the unfinished manuscript was open.

Soukichi had been working diligently on the second chapter before he had received Reiku's approval. Despite knowing that he would have to rewrite the first chapter multiple times over until he received Reiku's approval, he couldn't stop himself from writing more.

"Pfft, haha," he burst out in laughter... at himself. *Just how excited am I? Go back to a year ago, and I was so traumatized by the concept of writing that I couldn't even open the editing software without hyperventilating. Look at me now, though; I'm so motivated that it's got me cracking up.*

"It's all thanks to my friends and family," he said. *I'm truly blessed by the people around me. I might suffer from a terminal case of being a loner with no communication skills to speak of and have so few acquaintances I could count*

them on one hand, but all the people I know are really great people. From my parents, older sister, Mr. Umikawa, Tokiya, and...

"I've got to finish this," he looked at his screen with a new-found resolution. *This manuscript has to be done ASAP.*

Soukichi wanted to declare to the world that he was a professional writer with a puffed chest, because if he was able to do so, he'd finally manage to have some form of self-confidence, or so he thought. More importantly, however, he also wanted Kasumi to read this manuscript at the closest possible opportunity, to deliver a new work to the girl who said she'd always support him.

Maybe I'll be able to tell her when that happens, he thought. *About all the feelings I've had hidden in my heart for so long, and about how much I like her and want her to go out with me*

"...I thought up countless scenarios of how I'd confess to her," he let out a deep sigh. *God, why did it have to play out the way it did? My plan was to overcome my trauma, recover from my slump, then create a new work after I'd surpassed all those hardships. The finally would've been me going up to her, giving her the book, and saying, 'Here you go, Shiramori. This book is for you,' or something like that.*

Then again, it's not like that was what I ultimately decided on. It was just how I imagined that it was the way how I wanted my confession to go if I ever did it, he thought. *Whatever the case, I never saw it coming. Tell me that we would've ended up as a trial couple with me even confessing, and I wouldn't have believed it.*

"Guess life will constantly keep you on your toes about what happens next, huh," he muttered to himself. Just as certain people would have their dreams fulfilled, others would not be so lucky, he felt. Sometimes, people end up dating the senior they had been infatuated with for no apparent reason. Truly, truth was stranger than fiction.

"...Let's do this," Soukichi said as he busied himself with writing the rest of the manuscript while reflecting back on the life he had lived until now with conflicted regret.

Chapter Six

Youth Critical

"I've really done it this time..." Soukichi said, tormented by immense regret. "My God, I screwed up big time. So bad. How did it all end up this way?"

Soukichi was pacing around his room while cursing his stupidity. He checked his phone over and over again, even went outside just in case there was a problem with his house's wifi, but to no avail. He hadn't received a single message from Kasumi.

"She's definitely pissed at me, isn't she?" he asked himself.

She must be angry, fuming, livid. There's no other explanation. God dammit, I really dropped the ball here. Ugh, just why, or more like how did this happen? I don't recall doing anything particularly bad, but then if that were the case, why is she putting me in the doghouse? Soukichi continued to spiral.

No, all that aside, I'm most likely in the wrong in this scenario anyway, he concluded. *I must've unintentionally gotten complacent somewhere along the road now that I was so satisfied that I'm dating the person I like. That feeling of stability was my undoing. I let my guard down and didn't pamper her enough. Yeah, that must be it. It was my utter stupidity that drove her up the wall.*

"I'm so pathetic. Everyone knows that the hard part comes *after* you start dating. We're only in the trial period, and yet I just had to go and ruin it all by neglecting the most important part in a relationship: communication." he cursed himself.

"...I'm gonna start off by telling her I'm sorry," he said, then sat about writing up a message doing just that. *Apologizing without knowing what I did wrong might actually aggravate her even more, but I can't take it any more. Not being able to talk with her is driving me crazy.*

Soukichi ended up typing out a lengthy apology message, letting the proofreader side of him loose to check for any typos or missing words, before he made up his mind and pressed the send button. His message was marked "read" soon thereafter, which was quickly followed by a call from Kasumi.

"...H-Hello," Soukichi answered, still a little perturbed, as he hit the "accept call" button.

"Hi! What's up, Kuroya?" Kasumi asked, her voice fraught with surprise rather than anger. "I just saw that you sent me this really long apology message, but, umm, why exactly? Did you do something bad?"

“Uhhh, yeah about that... I-It’s really embarrassing to say, but I really have no clue what I did wrong. That apology was because I assumed I’d probably angered you somehow, so...” he explained.

“Wha? Me? Angry?”

“Huh? Weren’t you mad at me?” he questioned.

“Nope,” she responded, her confusion clear in her voice. “Not even a little bit. Hmm, did I look that way to you today? To me, it felt like we were just having one of our usual fun conversations.”

She’s right, he thought. *We were having a nice chat in the clubroom after class... well, if the idea of a “nice talk” is me getting made fun of. But yeah, it was par for the course, in that way*

“What made you think I was angry at you, then?” she asked.

“B-Because you haven’t sent me a message today!” he clarified, which was met with silence on Kasumi’s end. She’d practically made a habit of hitting him up with teasing messages every single day since the day they started dating, yet, it was now 9 PM, and he’d heard nothing from her the entire day. *Because of that, I kinda assumed the worst, and now here we are...*

“Ummm,” her perplexed voice eventually broke the silence. “You haven’t sent me a message, right? I don’t remember leaving you on read or anything like that.”

“That’s true, I haven’t,” he replied.

“So you’re telling me that you panicked because you didn’t get a message from me and misinterpreted that as me being irritated with you?” she asked.

“That... would appear to be the case, yes...” he replied. *Wait. Huh? Why is this starting to sound like another blunder on my part?!*

“...Pfftt. Ahahaha!” he heard Kasumi burst into laughter the very next moment, coinciding with the embarrassing realization of what he had said. “Hahaha! C’mon, Kuroya. You don’t have to be this anxious just because you didn’t hear from me today. I’d understand if I had kept you on read and ignored your message, but this? Hahaha!”

“Ugh,” he groaned.

“Mhmm, I see how it is. You really were missing me a whole lot, hmm?”

“I assure you that couldn’t be further from the truth. It’s just that you message me everyday, so I got a little worried when I didn’t receive anything from you,” he explained.

“Hmm. Well... That’s exactly what I was going for, to tell you the truth,” she said.

“Wha?” he baffled at her reply. *You’re telling me she planned for this?*

“I didn’t message you today on purpose,” she said.

“Huh? B-But why would you do that?”

“Because it’s always me who starts the conversation!” she exclaimed in a slightly sulking voice. “You never initiate things yourself.”

“You know how bad I am at that sort of thing,” he said. Whether it be via email or text message, Soukichi tended to shy away from sparking any conversation. He often found himself thinking that he would be bothering the other person and ultimately elected not to send anything altogether. *I do realize that this selfish line of thinking stems from a fear of being disliked by the person I’m messaging rather than out of consideration for them... but I’m still uncomfortable with the whole thing. I can’t exactly do anything about that.*

“I didn’t text you first today because I want you to reach out to me every once in a while. I figured this would be the push you needed to get that to happen,” she explained. “But... Hahaha! Not in a thousand years would I have expected you’d mistake it for me being upset at you.”

Shit, she got me again, he murmured to himself. *Well, it’s more like I shot myself in the foot again. I mean, that’s not exactly out of the norm for me, but this time might just be the worst one yet.*

“When I saw your message, my immediate thought was that something was wrong, so I called you as soon as I could. I guess it wasn’t urgent enough that I had to do it *right away*, though,” she joked.

“Why’s that?” he asked.

“Ah, ummm. Well, you see... You know what? This should make it easier for you to understand,” she hesitated briefly before the sound of what Soukichi could only assume to be splashing water came from her side.

“D-Don’t tell me that...”

“Yup, I was just in the middle of a bath,” she revealed, to which Soukichi’s heart started pounding like mad. “I’m the type that likes a relaxing read while taking a bath. Ebooks are so handy when it comes to this sort of thing, since you can’t exactly bring regular old paperbacks around water,” she added. Her words, however, went in one ear and out the other for Soukichi.

A bath? Shiramori, right now, is in the bath? he thought to himself. *Wait, that would mean that she’s...*

“Hehe! Not gonna lie, this feels kinda weird! You know, talking with you when I’m naked and all.”

“Gah!”

“That make your heart skip a beat?” she asked, her playful voice echoing inside his ears, causing them to tingle.

Soukichi’s heart was thumping so fast he was worried it’d give out on him. However, he desperately tried to keep a cool head. “Nope, not really. What you’re wearing doesn’t exactly matter all that much if we’re talking on the phone, after all. I mean, it’s not like I can see you,” he lied.

In reality, I'm so aroused just imagining it that I may end up getting a nosebleed.

"Hmm... I guess you're right. A phone call just doesn't cut it," she said, sounding a bit disappointed. It appeared that Soukichi had managed to conceal his distress, as well as his excitement.

Nice, I kept it cool, he thought as he struck a victory pose in his mind. Unfortunately for Soukichi, that gloating only ended up inviting a swift counterattack.

"Hey, Kuroya. Can you look at your screen a bit?" she asked.

"The screen? Why...? Ah!" he did as she instructed, only to yell in astonishment. What he'd just seen on his phone was so utterly incomprehensible that he almost fainted. The calling application they were using was switched over to the video call feature before he even knew it, meaning that he now had a full view of Kasumi.

"Heya, can you see me?" she inquired with a smile. She was indeed taking a bath, made apparent by the headband she was using to tie her hair in a bun and the beads of sweat forming on her face.

"Wh-What do you think you're doing, Shiramori?!"

"Hmm? But you told me that a normal phone call leaves a lot to be desired," she argued.

"I-I never once in my life said that! P-Please turn it off," he said, instinctively turning his face away and covering his eyes with his other free hand. Soukichi eventually succumbed to the temptation, however, and he peeked at the screen from between his fingers. This was normal for just about every guy going through puberty, or so he would justify it to himself.

Kasumi's triumphant grin occupied the majority of the rectangular screen. Her brow and cheeks, which were dripping with sweat, were glowing in a tinge of red, giving her an unusually seductive look to her. Obviously, Soukichi couldn't see below her neckline, but the glimpses he caught of her collarbone was extremely captivating, enough for his heart to beat at an even faster rate.

"Hehe, you're blushing," she said.

"Ugh!"

"If you're gonna snatch a few peeks, there's no point in pretending that you're looking away. Feel free to stare at the screen."

"H-Huh?! Since when was my camera... on?" he said, checking his screen in dismay. But just as he had expected, his camera was still turned off. "Wha...?"

"Hmmm, so you *were* sneaking looks at me, hmm?"

"I..."

“Wow, aren’t you quite the perv. Trying to act like a gentleman by averting your eyes, yet still stealing glances at a lady,” she teased with her usual upbeat laughter.

Dammit, she tricked me again. I fell right into her trap, he complained. *God, just what is it with this girl? How come she can predict my every move when she can’t even see me? Is she a legit psychic? Or am I really that easy to read?*

“Hehe, you’re such a cutie, Kuroya.”

“Can we stop this now, please? You might... drop your phone if we continue messing about,” Soukichi warned her.

“Ah, yeah, that’s a good point. You might be in for one big treat if I carelessly dropped my phone into the water right now.”

“Nevermind that now. Just please—”

“Say, Kuroya,” she interjected, her tone marginally different from before. “Wanna see?”

“See?” he questioned.

“Yeah. See me naked.”

“Wh-What’re you talking about...?!”

“Just answer the question. If you’re honest with me, I wouldn’t mind... showing you. I could maybe pull the phone away like this...” she said as she moved her phone away from her slightly. Her face had become smaller, and more of her upper body—namely a touch under her collarbone—came into view.

“Q-Quit playing around, Shiramori! You know we can’t do that sort of thing!” he protested, her body’s increasing exposure chipping away at his sanity by the second.

“But why?'' She posed an alluring question, all the while disregarding Soukichi’s desperate attempts to rid himself of his carnal desires. “You do know I’m your girlfriend, right?”

“...Ugh.”

“I’d be okay with showing my boyfriend that much if he wanted it,” she pressed a silent Soukichi. “So... do you wanna see?” she repeated. Soukichi continued to remain speechless; his heart was racing to such a degree that he felt it might tear itself out of his chest.

What the hell kind of a situation is this? he asked himself. *To see, or not to see, that is the question... Speaking honestly, of course I wanna see her naked. I also feel like if I admit that, it’ll end in total defeat for me, not to mention it’s possible that Shiramori isn’t joking about it all. No! I’m a man! I’ll bet it all on a miracle and tell her the truth!*

Soukichi was immersed in his thoughts, coming up with various possibilities in a moment’s notice. Unfortunately for him, however, he heard

Kasumi calling out in a somewhat unstrung voice only a few seconds later, “A-Alright! Time’s up!” she said, turning off her camera, with the calling application returning to its neutral screen.

“Uhh... Huh?”

“...Ha-Hahaha! Aww, you were *this* close, Kuroya! Too bad the clock ran out on you!” she declared.

“B-But you barely gave me enough time to decide.”

“No excuses allowed. Boys who dilly-dally don’t deserve to see me in the nude. Haah, you done goofed this time, Kuroya. I would’ve shown you right away if you’d answered ‘yes.’”

“...”

“Ahaha. A-Anyways! I’m starting to feel dizzy, so I’m gonna get out of the bath now. See ya tomorrow!” she rattled off, then hung up on him.

“What the hell was up with all that? My God...” he bellowed after staring at the “call ended” popup for a while, then he slumped himself over the top of his desk. *Haah, this trash game known as “love” never changes. It’s hard enough with the impossible choices it forces on you, but then it adds a time limit into the mix? What the actual hell, man?*

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It was the next morning. Soukichi rose from his bed at the same hour he usually did, had his usual breakfast, and climbed onto his bike to go to school as usual. His school was so close to where he lived that he could commute there by foot, but he had chosen to go by bike just because he felt like it. Right around when Soukichi was about to approach the end of his usual route to school, he encountered a not-so-usual event.

"Heya!" Kasumi greeted, standing in a narrow alley right before the crossing that led to the main street. "Morning, Kuroya."

"Good morning. Pray tell, what are you doing here?" he asked as he applied the brakes, then alighted from his bike.

"I was waiting for you, of course," she answered.

"Waiting? Wh-What are you plotting, exactly?" he asked.

"What? I'm not plotting anything. Sheesh, who do you take me for? One of those evil villains you see in *Bond* movies?" she questioned, visibly disgruntled.

Sorry, Shiramori. It's just that your teasing seems to have increased since we started going out, he thought. *I don't hate it, per se, but I don't think my heart can take much more, to be frank.*

"So we're actually gonna be going to school together? We're probably gonna stand out quite a bit," he added.

Chances are people just assumed that we're really good friends because they sometimes see us leaving the school together, but it'd be a whole different story if they spotted us while we're on our way there.

"*BZZZZT!* Wrong! But yeah, it'd be pretty bad if we did that. That'd basically be the same as us screaming to the entire world that we're dating," she agreed.

"Then why are you here?" he inquired.

"Here," she said as he extended a hand toward him.

"Huh? Wh-What is it? Are you looking for money or something?"

"What? No. Why would I want your money?"

"You know, maybe you randomly started charging me a fee for the time you spent going out with me. Like you're now basically demanding a 'meeting with me' expenses," he outlined.

"Those're called *business* meeting expenses. And you totally butchered how to use that word, by the way," she nonchalantly refuted Soukichi's unfunny joke. "I want the book that was being adapted into an anime, remember? You told me you were gonna lend me it the other day."

"Oooh," the realization suddenly hit him. *She must be talking about when we went to that bookstore. I did tell her that I would bring it "tomorrow," but*

damn. So much happened after I made that promise that it totally slipped my mind.

"So do you have it on you?" she queried.

"...Sorry. I completely forgot about it."

"You did, huh? That's okay, I guess. I only remembered it this morning myself, actually."

"I'll bring it with me tomorrow. Promise."

"Hmm, but I really, *really* wanted to read it today, though..."

"What do you reckon I should do?" he rhetorically asked.

Should I go back home and get it for her at the risk of being late for school? Sure, that'd mean the end for my perfect attendance record, but to hell with it. If Shiramori wants a book to read, then, come hell or high water, she's gonna get it.

Soukichi's mind had been made, and he was about to get on his bike to return home until Kasumi called out to him. "Say, Kuroya. Classes end kinda early for you today, right?"

"Huh...? Ah, yeah, they do. The teachers have a meeting today, so we get to go home early."

"Then what do you say we... stop by your place today?" she abruptly suggested, to Soukichi's enormous surprise.

"Stop by... my please?" he repeated.

"Mhmm. Can we? I just have to read that book today."

"...Sure, I don't mind."

"Wow, for real? Woo-hoo! Okay then, no circle activities for today! We'll meet at the bicycle parking after school, alright?" She happily set their rendezvous time, then dashed away on her own, leaving a dumbfounded Soukichi standing in place.

Shiramori? Coming to my house? What's with this unexpected turn of events? he mumbled. *Wait a second. Huh? Isn't it a pretty important event when the girlfriend visits her boyfriend's house? Was that really something we should have decided on so easily?*

"I need to calm down," he told himself. Although Kasumi was planning on coming over, Soukichi still lived with his family, meaning that his mother would most probably be in the house today, and so chances were that nothing major would happen either way. Besides, since the whole point of Kasumi's visit was for a book, she might not even step inside the house to begin with.

Actually, now that I think about it, she's kind of an airhead, isn't she? he pondered. *If she remembered that she wanted the book this morning, then she could've texted me instead of waiting for me here... Hmm, then again, maybe it popped in her head right before she got to school.*

Whatever the case, the wheel of time kept on turning, and school was over before long.

"Hehe. Man, it's been forever since I went to your house," Shiramori, who'd just arrived at the bicycle parking lot, said in a chippy voice.

This wasn't the first time she had visited his house by any account, as they used Soukichi's house as the base of operation when preparing for their "feature" for last year's cultural festival. Having said that, their "feature" didn't turn out to be anything groundbreaking, due to them being the only two people in their literature circle and all. What they'd come up with was a review book—which was nothing more than a club journal, in reality—where they each listed their personal favorite books.

"Don't know why you're so giddy about it. It's just another boring house," he pointed out.

"Aww, don't be like that. I love dropping by your place. Your mother is such a nice person, too!"

"You think so? I think she's a bit naggy, honestly."

"I'm pretty jealous, really. I wish I had a kind and joyful mother like yours," she muttered to herself, her expression clouded over in gloom, accentuated by the bleak smile she wore. Soukichi was dumbstruck, his heart ached, and he was unable to utter a single word. He called to mind what little Kasumi had told him about her past and her family.

"...Ah, sorry, sorry. That was such a mood killer, wasn't it?" she waved her hand in front of her. "Alright! Let's get going, shall we?" she said, returning to her trademark smile while leaving that depressing tone behind.

"Yeah, let's head out," he nodded, then walked out of the school gates with her. It was just like their after-school date from a while ago, where she'd walked next to him as he was pushing his bike.

They walked for a few minutes before entering a deserted street. That was when Kasumi got closer to him and said, "Hey, Kuroya. Isn't it about time we do the *thing*?" she proposed.

"What thing?" he asked.

"You know, that thing all couples do. Riding together on a bike."

"You know that goes against the traffic laws here in Japan, right? They've been cracking down hard on that sort of thing nowadays."

"Whaa? Come on, there's nobody here! I can just hop off once we reach a road that's more crowded, if that's the case. Can we do it? Pretty please?" she pestered.

"...Fine," he gave in. Soukichi wasn't so hell-bent on abiding by the law that he would reject Kasumi's earnest request, so he stopped walking and

mounted his bike. Kasumi then followed suit by sitting on the back of it, causing the bike to sink closer to the ground.

"It can be pretty dangerous if you fall, so grab on tight, okay? I've never ridden a bike with two people on it, just so you know." he warned her.

"Hmmm? That means it's okay if I hold on *extra* tight, then?" she teased.

"...Just hang moderately tight onto my shoulders, please."

"Hehe, you got it," she gave a chirpy reply before grasping onto his shoulders with both hands. The mere touch of Kasumi's arms around him was enough to set his heart aflutter, at the same time making him more frustrated with himself for having such a low tolerance toward women.

Soukichi then gathered power into his legs and placed his feet on the pedals. He figured that it would ruin the moment if they wiped out from the very start, so he slammed on the pedal with force, which resulted in a surprisingly smooth start.

"Whoa, look at us moving forward," she commented.

"I mean, yeah. Why wouldn't we be doing that?"

"Are you holding up well? I'm not too heavy, am I?" she asked.

"All good. You weigh about as much as I expected you to."

"Hey now! This is when you're supposed to say: 'You weigh *less* than I expected.'"

"Umm, well..." he stumbled.

I wasn't even kidding when I said that. I mean, she's pretty light, obviously, but not to a staggering degree. Therefore, she properly met my expectations. Still, Shiramori's got a smoking body without coming across as too skinny. Her waistline is pretty slim, too... Though I guess some parts of her, uhhh, stand out more than others.

"Haah, no delicacy at all with this one. I've been pretty conscious of the fact that I've gained weight lately, too," she complained.

"Why would you be worried about that? You're already pretty thin," he reassured her.

"Not really. I'm on the chunkier side when compared to Yumi or Rino."

Yumi and Rino were the names of the remaining two that made up the "Four Heavenly Beauties." Yumi Kamishiro, who was more widely known as the "Classic Black Haired Beauty," and Rino Sakon, simply referred to as "Pigtails Lolita."

"Cougar" and "Tanned Gal" were horrid nicknames, but the ones given for Rino and Yumi went above and beyond, ignoring any shred of feminine grace, in Soukichi's honest opinion. *Some edgelord must've come up with those nicknames, because they're absolutely criminal,* he thought.

Nevertheless, the point was that “The Black-Haired” and the “Lolita” were so extremely slim that Kasumi would be considered plump when compared side-by-side with them.

“Besides,” she grumbled, “you’re fairly lean as well, Kuroya. Just from walking next to you, I feel like I’ve put on some pounds.”

I don’t know how to feel about that comment.

“Sorry that I’m a walking talking toothpick.” he said.

“You know I didn’t mean it like that. I mean, I do get worried whether you’re getting your daily intake or not, but...” she said.

Do you now? I’m even more at a loss at how I should be reacting to that remark, he thought. *I’ll have you know that I’ve been kinda sorta maybe working out since last year!*

“But you know what?” she added in a seductive voice. She then moved her hands—which were originally placed on Soukichi’s shoulders—and wrapped them around his stomach while she clung herself, quite firmly at that, to his back at the same time.

“H-Hey! Wh-What are you...”

“You’ve got a pretty wide back for someone who looks so frail,” she observed.

“Sh-Shiramori...”

“It’s so... manly,” she continued. Kasaumi was fully embracing him at this point, so her voice was naturally in close proximity to his ears. Everything from Kasumi’s breathy whispers to the sensation of being held from behind prompted titillation beyond expression.

They were both wearing their blazers, which pretty much reduced almost all direct physical touch between them. However, “almost” wasn’t all, and Soukichi could quite clearly make out two particular bulges pressing against his back.

“This is sorta dangerous. Could you get off me, please?” he hastily calmed down his quivering heart and asked. He wasn’t lying; what Kasumi was doing did present a risk, though more one related to his mental well-being rather than his balance on the bike.

“Whaaa? Why would I? I bet you’re really getting into this right now,” she argued.

“...Am not.”

“Hehe, someone’s not being honest again,” she teased in an arrogant tone, then slowly let go of him. “You know what you remind me of? A rose. You may have some prickly thorns that are there to protect you, but you actually have a wonderful scent underneath all of that!”

“H-Huh?! I-I don’t even know what you’re getting at!” he objected.

“Hmm? You *totes* fit the bill! You try to act tough and hide the fact that you’re happy. It's perfect, actually.”

I’m being humiliated out here, Soukichi thought. *Man, I dunno what is it with that description, but being labeled in such detail is just pure torture.*

“Hmm, so if we’re going by flowers, and you’re a thorny rose, then I wonder what I’d be? It’s pretty lame to pick one for myself, but I really don’t feel like I’d be a rose, too,” she continued, ignoring a still stunned Soukichi.

“You’d be...” he paused after the answer dawned on him. He was thankful that they weren’t facing each other right then; otherwise, he wouldn’t have been able to carry on with his sentence, “...just like a sunflower.”

“A sunflower? Why’s that?” she inquired.

“You have that image of being simply cheerful, brilliant, and lovely,” he explained.

“Uh-huh...” she whined, not even close to being impressed.

Their bike ride only lasted the length of the secluded street, measuring up to just shy of five minutes. It was a short time indeed, but substantial nonetheless. It was a pure moment of adolescence, so highly concentrated and rectified in fact, that had it gone on for longer, Soukichi would’ve been cleansed completely of all his impurities.

That was... a really nice moment, he reflected. They continued walking until they had finally reached Soukichi’s place; it was an ordinary two-storied house in a residential area one would find just about anywhere. “Would you like a drink? Maybe some tea?” he casually suggested, feeling that it would be rude to lend her the book, then just turn her away.

“Really? I’d love some, thanks!” she responded with a delighted nod.

“Hmmm, what? It’s locked?” he said as he tried to open the door, but it just wouldn’t open.

I guess nobody’s around? Soukichi surmised and took out his phone to message his mother. He didn’t have to wait long for a reply, however, as she promptly let him know she was doing some shopping and therefore wasn’t at home.

“Looks like my mom’s out right now,” he said.

“I see. So what should we do?” she asked.

“Well, I do have the key to the house, so getting inside’s no problem,” he said, pulling out the house’s key out of his bag, then unlocking the door. “Make yourself at home.”

“Huh?” Kasumi stood with a puzzled look at Soukichi, who had opened the door and was urging her to come inside. Her eyes were wide in dismay, with it being evident on her cheeks that she was slightly blushing.

Ummm, huh? Did I... make a mess of things again?! Soukichi wondered.

He'd only intended to show her basic hospitality by offering some tea, but he hadn't accounted that it was an entirely different story now that nobody else was at the house. Unbeknownst to him, the situation at hand had essentially become that of a boyfriend trying to invite his girlfriend into their house while their parents were away.

"W-Wait! I didn't mean it like that! I just thought that it was natural for me to offer you something! What I'm saying is that... I definitely have no ulterior motives, and I won't try anything funny! I swear!" he hurriedly attempted to justify himself, but instead only dug himself a deeper grave.

God, that was awful. Literally the exact opposite of what I wanted to do! Who even shouts "I won't try anything funny with you" like that?! Now she knows I've been imagining weird stuff, he murmured. *I must sound like a guy who's gotten into an argument with his girlfriend in front of a love hotel where he's trying to convince her that they're only there to take a short break, and nothing more.*

"...Pfft. Ahaha," she chuckled in relief, amused with Soukichi's untidy explanation. "Well then, if you insist you aren't up to something!" she cheerfully continued, returning to her usual cool self.

Soukichi showed her to his room on the second floor, then headed back downstairs to prepare a couple of beverages for them both. He next put a pod in the Dolce Gusto and made two decaf cafe au lait. Kasumi had told him that she was fine with anything, but based on how well he knew her by now, he was well aware that she wasn't fond of black coffee.

She'll enjoy this, for sure, he thought. Soukichi then returned to the room and handed Kasumi, who was sitting at the foot of the bed, her cup of coffee. "Here you go."

"Thanks," she replied as she took the cup from him. She then took a sip and took a look around her surroundings. "Your room is as tidy and neat as ever, Kuroya."

"I just don't have many things to clutter up the room," he stated.

There wasn't much to make a scene about in his room, save for the rather large bookshelf. Said bookshelf had a row that showcased all of Soukichi's "First Rate" books, whereas his "Second Rate" books were packed up in a cardboard box inside his closet. He switched up the books that he put on display with the ones which weren't periodically. Rating people's books in such an arrogant manner didn't exactly sit well with Soukichi, but he had no other choice, considering the limited space afforded to him on the shelf.

"And here's the book you were looking for," he said as he grabbed her promised book from the shelf and handed it to her.

"Thank you," she snickered, taking the book from him. "Hehe, you must rate it pretty highly if it got a place on your shelf."

“I guess you could say that,” he replied. Kasumi had grown to be quite familiar with the rating system he had been using ever since the last time she’d visited him. She’d even laughed it off, saying that she did a similar sort of thing when ranking her favorites. *Damn, I kinda messed up just now. She was going on about how she wanted to experience the book without knowing anything about it beforehand, but now she knows I liked it enough to put it on my shelf.*

Guess it’s still better than the alternative, Soukichi thought. *It would’ve been quite the let down if I had brought it out of my “Second Rate” box.*

“I’m seriously looking forward to reading this... Hold on a second. Are you trying to break the world record for the longest time standing up or something?” she sarcastically asked.

“Ummm, no?” he answered.

“Then sit your butt down!” she proposed while patting the small spot next to her.

“Oh, can I?”

“Of course you can. It *is* your room, after all, Kuroya,” she replied with some dumbfounded glances at him.

Ah, that’s right. What am I supposed to do here, though? I feel like a stranger in my own home somehow, he thought as he plopped himself down where she’d been indicating. Both Soukichi’s heart and mind couldn’t fathom the fact that Kasumi was alone with him in this very room. He recalled the events of last year when she’d first come here. He dealt with a great deal of distress back then, as well, but it was somehow even worse this time around.

We’re a “trial couple” currently, and we’re the only ones in the house right now, he thought. The situation was too sapping for him to ignore. *Deep breaths. In and out... Haah, I gotta calm down. Nothing’s gonna happen. Absolutely nothing! It’s too early for us to even begin thinking about that sort of stuff, anyway. Plus, I don’t know when Mom is gonna come home either, so we can’t exactly get too comfortable. We only recently just held hands, so the next logical step would be—*

Soukichi’s internal monologue persisted, contemplating the many possible next steps for their relationship. However, while he was still writhing in anguish, a sneak attack he never saw coming took him unawares.

“Take that!” she exclaimed.

“Uwahhh!” he shrieked. Being that Soukichi was so absorbed in his thoughts, Kasumi decided to take the opportunity to launch a tickle assault on him. She snuck around behind him without him noticing and grabbed him from the side with both hands.

“Ahaha! That was quite the manly scream I just heard,” she said.

“Wh-What are you doing?” he questioned.

“I couldn’t stand the silence any longer, so... I kinda felt that this was a good icebreaker.”

“Don’t give me that.”

“Hehe. Wow, so this is one of your weak points, huh? Good to know! Kitchy-kitchy-koo!” she joked as donned her usual frisky smile.

“C-come on! P-Please stop, ugh!” he pleaded, desperately attempting to break away from Kasumi, but to no avail. She had a solid hold on him, and she didn’t appear to be letting go any time soon. Her hands, which she’d placed near his ribs, continued their attack.

I don’t even know what I should do anymore, he groaned. *I’m genuinely ashamed at how much this tickles right now. It honestly doesn’t bother me, messing around like this, but... but my face is so unbelievably red that I’m willing to bet I look like a tomato right now. Ugh, screw it all!*

“Don’t go holding back there, little lady! Let’s have some fun together,” she said in a strange accent.

“I’m going to get real mad if you don’t cease this tomfoolery right now!” he admonished, pinning down both of her hands with his own. Soukichi directed his glare straight at Kasumi, though his watery eyes would render his warning... unconvincing, let’s say.

“Ahaha, my bad. I guess I kinda went overboard with things since you weren’t resisting.”

“Making fun of me again, are you? You don’t want this smoke! I *will* get you back!” he argued back.

“Hmm. Really now?” she questioned, then rose to her feet with an evocative grin. She then wrapped her hands behind her back and leaned toward him. “Here. Do your worst.”

“...Huh?”

“You heard me. I’m giving you the chance to get even with me. It wouldn’t be fair otherwise, right?”

Sh-She couldn’t possibly be asking me to... do to her what she did to me just now, could she?! he asked bewilderedly.

“Go right ahead. No need to be shy,” she enticed with a sadistic smirk, her cheeks, ironically, flushed with embarrassment. Kasumi was totally defenseless, with her hands behind her back.

From here, it looks like she’s making it easy for me to go for her ribs, but there’s one... well, two big issues, he contemplated. Kasumi’s current posture only further accentuated her already voluptuous chest that was perking up from underneath her shirt. Soukichi didn’t know where to look and could

only look downward in response. He was nervous, which was only solidified by his mouth drying up.

What is this? What do I do, or should I do for that matter? he questioned. *Is it really okay for me to touch her like this?*

"What's wrong, Kuroya? You can touch me if you want."

"Umm, well..." he wavered. Perhaps going for the sides of another person was pretty average for friends of the opposite sex without needing to be a couple. Still, it was virtually impossible for a loner like Soukichi. He couldn't, for the life of him, bring himself to caress a girl so offhandedly, more so because it was Kasumi.

"I knew you wouldn't be able to go through with it. Guess you're too shy to feel up the stomach of the senior you love so much, hmm? Who's my timid little mouse?"

"Ugh!" he squealed. *Shit! She's so confident that I won't actually try anything that she's taunting me! ...I mean, if I look at it from another perspective, she may be acting like this because she trusts me that much, but this is just too disgraceful for me as a man! I can't go on being such a coward! I have my dignity to uphold!*

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Do it, Soukichi. Do it! This is the perfect timing for the unexpected, he psyched himself. *I have to show her that I'm a real man when push comes to shove so she won't belittle me anymore! When one door closes, another opens! It's my time to shine and secure a win in this stupid game of 'love' I consistently lose at. It's high time I man up!*

"Hehe, you're so cute, Kuroya. Your face is all red, and for what? All you're doing is touching my stomach. But you know, that's what I like so much about you—" she said.

Right when she'd completely let her guard down and took her eyes off of Soukichi, though, he pushed her down the bed forcibly, quite aggressively, and against her will. Soukichi—who'd been so hesitant to touch her stomach or shoulders before—now had her lying back-first on his bed.

"Wh-Wha... Whaaa?!" a hysteric cry escaped from Kasumi while she struggled to grasp the situation at hand. "K-Kuroya?" she asked, staring up at him with confusion and anxiety in her eyes. Regardless, Soukichi didn't ease up on his grip and kept her pinned down as he climbed onto the bed himself.

"U-Umm... I-I'm sorry, Kuroya. I took things too... far," she apologized.

"..."

"N-No, wait! We can't do this! It's way too sudden, and I haven't prepared myself yet!" Kasumi quibbled. Soukichi felt like she was telling him something, but he didn't make out most of what she had said; this wasn't the time for it, after all. Something else had caught his attention, and he shifted his focus to what was outside the window.

"Oh crap, my mom is back!" he shouted. He figured he heard the sound of his mother's car engine, so he briskly looked outside to check. The worst case scenario had happened. To his horror, his mother, who had been out grabbing some groceries, had returned much earlier than expected and was already out of the car.

"Wh-Wha? Y-Your mother is back?" she asked.

"Looks like it. We gotta hide you, fast! Get under the covers!" he shouted.

Dammit, there's no time!

Soukichi thought about hiding Kasumi in the closet, but there wasn't enough space because of his cardboard box. Under the bed was out of the question, too. It was all covered in dust since he had put off cleaning it due to his laziness; he couldn't possibly demand she crawl into such a filthy spot.

My mom will be here any second now. In that case, we have no other option, he decided. "I-I'll get under the sheets with you!"

“You WHAT?” she howled in confusion. Soukichi ignored Kasumi, however, as she crawled under the blanket with her. He made it so that she was completely hidden under them, while he only covered his lower half.

It’ll obviously look like someone’s hiding under here if she does it alone, which means I need to cover myself, too! he thought.

“W-Wait a second,” she appealed.

“Just work with me on this one. We’re gonna make it seem like it’s just me here,” Soukichi explained. He reckoned that his lower half protruding would lead his mom to believe he was there alone, provided that Kasumi was wholly concealed and practically glued to Soukichi, that was.

“K-Kuroya...”

“I’m so sorry for making you do this, but please get closer to me.”

“Wh-Whoa! H-Hold on a moment...!”

Soukichi held back his embarrassment and brought Kasumi further in toward him. He didn’t know what was happening underneath the covers, since he couldn’t exactly see properly, but he could very much imagine how hectic it was.

She’s glued to me now... he muttered. The mere thought was enough for his head to feel like it was on fire, but he made an effort not to dwell on it much, given this was an emergency.

“What are you doing? Ah, n-not there! J-Just listen to me, Kuroya!” she protested.

“It’s going to be okay,” Soukichi guaranteed as he held her down to prevent her squirming about. “I’ll protect you, no matter what.”

“...”

Kasumi, who was continuing to struggle, calmed down for one mere instant.

Clank, echoed the sound of the front door of the house immediately after, followed by Soukichi’s mother calling out to him, ”You home, Soukichi?”

She probably figured out I was already inside from the opened door and my shoes by the.... Wait. Shoes? he remembered all of a sudden. *Crap! I forgot to hide her shoes!*

“Are you having a friend over or something?” his mother asked.

Welp, this is far from ideal. She must’ve seen the sneakers. God, what do I do now? Do try to pull a fast one on her and tell her they’re actually mine?

He then came to a realization. *I mean, they’re obviously women’s loafers... Maybe I should take a different approach overall. Yeah, something like confessing to her that I stole the shoes of a girl I like. She might start crying, but I can’t think of any other way,*

He mulled it over for a while, racking his brains over various ideas, until Kasumi started wiggling under the sheets once more.

“Phew!” she peeked her head out before resting it next to his. “Pretty stuffy down there, I’ll tell you that.”

“Wh-What are you doing, Shiramori?! Quick, we gotta hide you before Mom sees us and—”

“About that...” Kasumi interrupted him in a collected voice, ensuring he was paying attention to her. “Why would it matter if she sees me here or not?” she pointed out.

After her observation, they both went down the stairs and greeted his mother like any normal person would.

“Oh, well if it isn’t Shiramori! It’s been so long,” Soukichi’s mother greeted the two.

“It really has been!” Kasumi replied.

“It’s been what? Half a year now? You look like you lost some weight,” his mother added.

“Not at all, unfortunately. I actually put on some, if you could believe it.”

“Have you really? You still look fantastic, though.”

“Aww, thank you. You’re too kind! *And* stunning, if I do say so myself!”

“Oh my, look who’s a smooth talker. I’ll be going out again, but do make yourself at home, okay? And good luck with working on that club journal thing!”

“Thank you so much!” Kasumi happily said.

“You better make sure he’s comfortable while I’m out, you understand?” his mother warned Soukichi.

“Yeah yeah,” he replied.

“I don’t like that tone of yours, young man.”

“Sorry, ma’am.”

“Much better. Bye now!” His mother then left the house on another shopping trip after that exchange, only to return a few seconds later because she forgot to bring her wallet. The front door closed once again, leaving Kasumi, who looked to be having the time of her life, and Soukichi, who was close to dying of humiliation, all alone in the house.

“He-he-he,” she chuckled.

“...Ugh!” he grunted before practically sprinting back to his room. Naturally, though, Kasumi was following him close behind.

“Maaan, that was totally unexpected. I never pegged you for being the type who was so daring that you’d push me onto the bed all of a sudden!” she joked with a cheery tone.

Seriously, man. Just what were you THINKING back there?! he said, taking himself to task. *There was no reason to hide Shiramori! None! She’s been here before, not to mention she’s met my mom already. Hell, we could’ve just come up with a random excuse like, I dunno, working on a club journal, maybe?!*

Besides, she wouldn't exactly come to the conclusion that we're going out just because she came here. And even if worse comes to worst and she did figure it out, it wouldn't be a problem. It's not like it's a taboo relationship like with an old man and a high school student, or a certain manwhore and a 27 year old working adult woman, he continued. *But nope, I just had to go and panic. I've really done it this time, and I doubt Shiramori will ever let me live it down!*

"I can't say I woke up today thinking that I'd be sleeping in the same bed as you. I was really hoping our first time would be more romantic than that!" she jested. The chase didn't stop even when they were both back in Soukichi's room, either. "Remember when you tried to be so cool by saying you'd protect me, no matter what?"

"Spare me, I beg of you," he wailed. Her impression of him was the final nail in the coffin. *My God, that was so cringe! Why did I ever say that?! I swear that's all I do. Put in the effort for literally no reason and then have it blow up in my face.*

"I dunno... I can't exactly let you off the hook so easily. It was pretty suffocating, you know? And look at what you did to my uniform. It's all wrinkly now. Plus, you knocked me around all over the place down there."

"I-I'm so sorry," he bowed in apology.

"Hehehe. Nah, I'm just messing with you, though. I'm not mad or anything," she snickered. "I know that was all for my sake, after all. Thank you, Kuroya."

"I don't deserve to be thanked for anything. It was all pointless in the end, anyway."

"I don't care if it *was* or not! I was happy that you... went that far just for me."

"Then why are you bullying me like this...?" he heaved a deep sigh.

"Well, I gotta get back at you somehow! It really did surprise me, after all," she responded with a mischievous grin, before her expression eventually shifted to a more transient one. "You always... do all you can to help me."

Kasumi then got up, all the while staring at the sunset sky outside the window. The beams of the sinking sun illuminated her face, giving it a somewhat serene, yet mysterious overtone.

"I dunno what would've happened to me if you weren't there to help out at last year's cultural festival," she continued.

"It was nothing, really," he answered. Soukichi had worked himself to the bone so he could be of benefit to the senior he adored; Kasumi. *But she's wrong. That's not the case at all. It was she who really saved me back then, not the other way around...*

“I’m still very grateful for it. I do count on you a lot, too, and... Ah!” she raised her voice, cutting her sentence off midway through. Her gaze was fixated on Soukichi’s bookshelf. She then reached out and grabbed a certain book, one that was placed in the rightmost corner on the upper shelf, where it would stand out the most.

“Whoa, isn’t this a blast from the past?” she admired, fondly gazing at its cover. “This is the book we both happened to be reading at the same time when we first met.”

“O-Oh, right. I guess that did happen,” he feigned ignorance, but the distraught was running rampant inside of him.

Crap, that totally slipped my mind. I’d prepared things ahead of time and put it away the day before Shiramori came to visit for the first time, but it didn’t even occur to me on this occasion because of how sudden this all was! This is really bad. I can’t let this book be the center of our conversation, he concluded. If I do, *Shiramori will end up finding out that this copy is actually hers!*

“Say, Kuroya...” she called out to Soukichi, who was trembling with fear, “this is my book, correct?”

Soukichi almost choked on his own saliva that instant as he unconsciously raised his head to look at Kasumi. He was stupefied, which contrasted heavily with Kasumi, whose eyes were filled with repose.

“We were in a rush to go back home on that day, so we both ended up taking each other’s copy by mistake, am I correct?” she asked.

“...So you noticed?”

“Sure did,” she nodded slowly. “You probably picked up on it pretty quickly, too. Maybe right from the very start, even. Since I did hear you go all “Ah” when I grabbed it.”

“I’m so sorry,” he lamented. *Yup, it’s all over now. She knows all about how I pretended I knew nothing and just walked away with her book after having just met. I’m human garbage. She must think I’m a major stalker now.*

“No need for apologies. I’m not angry with you. After all...” she hesitated, then bashfully continued, “I did it on purpose.”

“You what?” he inquired, unable to comprehend what she’d just said. *She took my book... on purpose?*

“You heard me. I took the book that was on the table fully knowing it was yours.”

“But why do such a thing?”

“I wonder, ahaha. I really don’t know why myself. It just sorta came to mind, and I acted on it. Figured it’d be funny or something like that,” she flashed a somewhat contemplative smile. “I think I might’ve just been too excited that someone new had joined the circle. I mean, it was a junior that

happened to be a guy who seemed to have the same taste as me. So, you know, I was in high spirits, because it felt... like it was written in the stars, somehow."

"..."

"I did all that because I figured it'd be loads of fun if we experienced something like one of those scenes you see in dramas where we exchange books and all," she confessed.

Kasumi had finally come clean with her confession that had been one year in the making. It was one that Soukichi couldn't fully grasp at first, disbelief running amuck in his head. What he'd done on that fateful day—with him switching books with her—was some sort of dark past he'd wanted to leave in his veritable rearview mirror. He deeply regretted and was even disgusted at himself for his actions.

In spite of that, it hadn't all just been a mere coincidence. They both so happened to be reading the same book, yes, but that random occurrence had kindled within the two a shared veiled desire that caused both of their hearts to quiver. Kasumi had coveted *something more*, as had Soukichi. *Something* that would've allowed the fluke that was fate to prosper. *Something* that would've given credence to calling their meeting an act of fate.

"But well, nothing happened afterwards. You never brought it up once with me," she continued.

"How could I? I was kicking myself over stealing your book without you knowing! Also, I was scared of when you were going to find out about it."

"Ahaha, so that's how it was. I too was worried about what to do if you discovered I'd taken your book on purpose. Guess we both couldn't talk about it, it turns out!"

Looks like we were both in some kind of stalemate, waiting for the other person to react first, he thought. It made sense, then, that nothing ended up happening in regards to that.

"Look at us. One year passed without us saying a word about it to each other. Hehe, we really are alike in the weirdest of ways, it seems," she joked.

We're... alike? he mused. That word alone left him feeling ticklish upon hearing it. *A gloomy, contrarian loner, and a bright, popular social butterfly. We're polar opposites, but still alike somehow? Hah, what a world...*

"So that whole book-exchanging incident didn't amount to anything, but we still had other moments together, and we even ended up dating. Did you ever see that happening? Life sure does work in mysterious ways," she grumbled to herself, once again sitting herself down on top of the bed before tapping on the empty spot right next to her, urging Soukichi to sit down. "Come over here, Kuroya."

“Why, though?” he questioned.

“Just do it already,” she declared with a tone that didn’t allow him to refuse.

“I-If you say so,” he obeyed while he quelled his nervousness and positioned himself next to Sergeant Kasumi as per her orders. It was stressful enough having to sit relatively close to her, but Kasumi only added salt to the wound, executing quite the unthinkable maneuver.

“Bang!” she yelled, making some sort of sound effect, as she pushed Soukichi down on top of the bed.

“Wh-Whaaa?!” he yelped.

“Hehe, now I have you pinned down.”

“What did you do that for?!”

“Payback for earlier,” she looked at him from on top of him, clearly enjoying the state of utter turmoil she’d plunged him into, then threw herself down onto the bed next to him. They were now both lying on the bed so unbelievably close to one another with their eyes locked. “I’m kinda disappointed that our first time in bed together turned out how it did, so we’re doing it over again.”

“D-Doing it over...?”

“Mhmm. You don’t have to worry. I won’t do a thing to you. All we’re gonna do is sleep next to each other,” she said in a soothing tone, like she was comforting a frightened child. Kasumi then shifted her body to face Soukichi and stared straight at him, all while being so intimately close to her that he could almost feel her breath on his skin, which threw him for a loop.

“Say, Kuroya. Do you... like me?”

“Do I have to say it...?”

“Yup, you absolutely have to. I’ll break up with you on the spot if you don’t.”

“...I like you.”

“How much?”

“A fair bit.”

“Only a fair bit?”

“...I love you so, so much!” he furiously yelled.

“Hehehe, good boy,” she said with a satisfied smile while caressing his cheek. This was quite humiliating for him, but what was even more humiliating was the fact that a small part of him didn’t mind this kind of treatment. “Remember what you told me the other day? That it only takes a girl being nice to loner for them to end up head over heels for them?”

“I do,” he said. *I said that to hide my embarrassment when she asked me what I liked the most about her.*

“Hehe, you sure do have it pretty rough, falling for a mean girl like me.”

“Gah,” he squeaked. Kasumi’s enchanting smile and provocative remarks—which he took point-blank—ingrained themselves inside Soukichi’s head through his eyes and ears, sinking deep into his brain and dissolving piece by piece.

“Oh right! How about we take a picture to commemorate this moment?” she suggested while whipping out her phone and opening the camera app. “We don’t have a single photo together, now that I think about it.”

“I’m pretty sure we took some already, like at the end of the cultural festival,” he mentioned.

“Okay, smartypants, I meant it as in we haven’t taken a picture *since* we started dating. But you are right. We did take a few photos of our club activities for prosperity’s sake,” she said. Even so, Kasumi was still insistent on doing it, scooching over across the bed. She had closed the already short distance between them furthermore, to the point of their shoulders rubbing with one another. “We’ve never gotten one while we’re this close to each other, no?”

“*Someone* will get burnt if you get too close,” he stated.

“Jeez, talk about edgy. I’m guessing that’s a twist on the whole ‘don’t fall in love with me if you don’t wanna get hurt’ shtick?” she chuckled.

It wasn’t, but alright, he answered her in his thoughts. That *someone* Soukichi was talking about was none other than himself. His body and face practically went up in flames the more Kasumi gave him attention, or teased him, or drew near him. He felt the innermost, most tender portion of his heart—one which he normally kept hidden from other people—go up in flames from her radiant presence, leaving behind sizable burn marks.

“Alright, say cheese,” she said.

“Just please don’t post this anywhere on social media. If other loners discover I got myself a girlfriend, they’ll be after my head,” he warned.

“Ahaha, I understand. Hell would break loose if someone finds out from my end as well, so I’m gonna keep this all to myself.”

“Thank you.”

“It’ll be like our little treasure.”

“...I couldn't have worded it better,” he agreed with her after a pause. They would both hear the sound of the camera shutters closing after the episode of the incoherent idle chatter exchanged between was over.

Their first photo together since their relationship’s onset was thus a selfie of them lying on the bed. Soukichi examined the photo after Kasumi took it and found her adorable grin displayed on screen. He, on the other hand, only managed to force out a stiff excuse of a smile. Their photo turned out to be... less than stellar, to put it politely. However, Soukichi would go so

far as to say that it encapsulated them and their personalities quite accurately.

Kasumi was in the driver's seat and had been leading Soukichi by the nose in the end, from being in control of their first home date to taking the selfie together. Today's results in the game of "love" had ended in two consecutive and quite overwhelming defeats for Soukichi, adding two more notches to his already significant losing record.

Calling it a mere "defeat" is an understatement at this point, he mulled. *What sort of loser have I turned into to feel so happy even when I've been thrashed?*

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Epilogue

Classes had ended for the day, and Soukichi was heading to the club room as was habit for him by this point. When he got there, though, he found Kasumi, who had arrived earlier than him, lying down over top of the long table asleep. Her blazer was draped over the back of the pipe chair she sat on, and her phone was still in her hands.

I guess she was playing on her phone before she dozed off, he thought.

"Oh yeah, I do remember her saying something about not getting enough sleep last night."

Soukichi recalled the exchange they'd had through text that morning where Kasumi told him she had stayed up late reading a book and was subsequently sleep deprived. He entered the club room, taking extra care to quietly close the door behind him. Soukichi walked with soft footsteps, gently placed his belongings on the table, pulled out a chair ever-so-noiselessly, and took a seat in his usual spot facing Kasumi.

I don't wanna be a bother and wake her up if she really didn't get any shut eye, he murmured. *Especially now that she's sound asleep like this. I want her to get a good rest.*

Soukichi took yet another fond look at the sleeping Kasumi, who was currently in a completely vulnerable state. Everything about her from her long, silky eyelashes and her pert nose, to the soft sighs she exhaled through her rosy lips was so incredibly mesmerizing that his eyes couldn't help but be drawn to her. He would usually avert his eyes immediately out of embarrassment if they ever locked with Kasumi's, but considering she wasn't awake at the moment, he could take his time in intently gazing at her.

"...She's sooo cute," the words naturally escaped him, and with them came an overwhelming feeling of joy that surged throughout his body. "My God, she's freakin' adorable as is, but her peaceful face while she's sleeping? Nah, it's on a whole 'nother level. Like, damn girl, are you an angel or what?"

"I still can't believe this heaven-sent being is my girlfriend. We're now an actual couple... well, a trial couple, but still. Me with my senior whom I was smitten with for so long... It's like a dream come true," the remarks—which would normally leave his face looking like a tomato just from thinking of them in the first place—rolled off his tongue with ease. Soukichi still struggled to comprehend the fact he was dating the girl he was always madly in love with; the girl he'd wanted to make his, but had mostly given up on that ever happening at some point. Going out with her, to him, felt much like a fantasy that he didn't want to awaken from.

“Thank you, Shiramori,” he molded his true feelings into words and expressed his gratitude to a still napping Kasumi. “I seriously can’t say how blessed I am that I’m dating you. And to think a loner like me managed to get such a beautiful, amazing girlfriend. I’m probably the—no, I know for a fact I’m the luckiest person on Earth.”

Soukichi understood that saying all of that when the person in question wasn’t awake to hear it was pointless, but he knew how much of an impossible task that would be for him. The moment he’d be face-to-face with Kasumi, he would become too shy to convey how he honestly felt about her.

Pssht, God, he grumbled. *She really was right on the money with calling me a “thorny rose” or whatever. That, I can’t argue. Oh yeah, speaking of which...*

“You may not be aware of this, but there was another reason why I likened you to a sunflower,” he said as he thought back to the term he came up with for her back when they rode on the bicycle together, believing it truly captured the type of woman that Kasumi was.

“I told you it was because I found you simply cheerful, brilliant, and lovely, but that isn’t the whole story,” he declared the truth he had kept hidden due to it being too awkward for him to say at the time. “Sunflowers are known for being the happy flower, for being so vibrant and energetic, as if they were mirroring the glowing sun itself,” he muttered to himself, as though he was reciting something from a book.

Soukichi slowly extended his hand toward hers, which lay flat on top of the desk. Still, he didn’t dare touch it, because he didn’t want to rouse her from her slumber... and because he wanted to relish her heavenly expression for just that little bit longer.

I want to hold her hand right now, if I’m being honest, he thought. *Or maybe, instead of that, wrap my arms around her and give her a big hug...*

“And that’s how you are to me. You’re my sun, the light of my life. I got discouraged over the smallest of things, felt miserable, and fell into a pit of despair of my own making. But you lightened up that dark world I locked myself inside of,” he confessed.

It was because of you that I was able to stand on my feet again, that I was able to move on and focus on the future again.

Soukichi drowned in his own dream and got manipulated by it, but he was now finally capable of working toward it once more. He began to recall his past, which was full of nothing but humiliation and profound regret to him for the longest time, as something that now had some meaning behind it. Soukichi had even managed to have a little more faith in himself.

It all spoke volumes to how Kasumi’s existence was his veritable light of salvation, bestowing light up his world with radiance akin to that of the

fervent sun at times, yet becoming as softly engulfing as the sweet moonlight at others. She was, in every sense of the word, a piercing, white beam of light that broke through and shined upon the shadowy depths of the otherwise gloomy forest that was his very soul.

I was convinced she would always be out of my reach, he thought.

Soukichi was satisfied with just watching her from afar, simply being content with the fact that he sat in close proximity to her. He even went above and beyond to convince himself it was bold of him to even hope that their relationship would ever become anything more substantial. Doing that would be tantamount to him reenacting the story of Icarus, he thought; he'd only be flying too close to the sun, and it would ultimately lead to his demise.

Nowadays, however...

"..."

He stretched his arm a bit further, making both of their finger tips touch slightly. That sensation alone numbed his whole body; it was the absolute farthest point he could bear to go with at the moment. The mere touch of their fingers rendered him so excited, nervous, and unable to process anything else all at the same time, and he was worried about what would happen to him if he actually held her hand.

"I'm so sorry you've got this sad sack for a boyfriend, Shiramori. Man, I'm pathetic," he apologized, cursing his heart that would flutter at every little thing. Soukichi then said in a sort of declaration, "But I will get better at this, you'll see. I dunno what kind of black magic was at play for us to end up as we are currently... but now that I've gotten this chance, I won't let my love for you end unrequited."

He would stop pretending to give up on reaching out to Kasumi and then running away, making excuses to himself that she was too sacred to pursue, as if she were some sort of untouchable deity. All of that, as well as his self-imposed idealized images of her, would be no more from this day forward.

Soukichi was now determined and stretched out his hand, hell-bent on seizing even the moon and the sun alike. He'd decided to extend that hand of his with unwavering resolve, even if it cost him his dear life.

"It might not be in the cards for me right now, and I know I've been racking up one loss after the other until today, but I swear to you that I will win someday. I will definitely make your heart mine, Shiramori. I promise," he stated to his as-of-yet dormant Goddess. It was a pledge, but also his proclamation of war in this psychological game dubbed "love" they were heatedly battling in.

It's a terrible game on all accounts and one that will never gel well with me, he thought. *But I won't run away anymore. As much as this game isn't for me, I've made up my mind to continue playing it.*

"Pfft, haha," he burst out in laughter at the end of his prolonged speech. "Hah, what the hell am I doing here? I've just been rambling to myself for minutes now," he made fun of himself while pulling back his fingers that were touching hers.

Sheesh, I said some pretty corny stuff back there. Thank God nobody heard me. If somebody did, I may have to contemplate suicide.

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AAAAHHHH! I'm very much awake, just so you know!!! Kasumi internally screamed. She somehow managed to keep a facade of composure on the outside, but on the inside, she was currently all over the place.

My whole body feels like it's gonna go up in flames if I let myself go for one second! This is so embarrassing! she thought. *Ahh, how did everything turn out like this? I only wanted to toy around with Kuroya like I always do.*

The truth was that Kasumi had been awake from the very start and was only pretending to be asleep in order to tease Soukichi. She wasn't lying when she'd told him that she didn't get much sleep the previous night, but after sending that message his way, she all of a sudden thought she could pull some mischief on him and thus came up with this little trick.

Kasumi's idea was centered around what sort of actions Soukichi would take if he found her sleeping in front of him. Fueled by her curiosity, which was all the push she needed, Kasumi went ahead with the scheme. She figured things would play out in one of a variety of ways, such as him taking a photo of her snoozing, perhaps catching a quick whiff of her blazer, or maybe even going in for a smooch.

Regardless of whatever move he made on her, she planned to poke fun at him by yelling something along the lines of: "Nuh-uh-uh, too bad! I was awake the entire time! He-he-he, what exactly were you trying to pull just now? ... Hmm, really? Wow, I never thought you'd take advantage of a sleeping girl to get up to some antics!"

However, reality instead had a sneak attack in store for her in the form of Soukichi gushing about his love for her.

Gosh, Kuroya, why did you have to talk about how much you love me all of a sudden like that?! And when I'm sleeping, no less! she cried. *I'm blushing just hearing you blathering about it, by the way! I know it may look like I'm catching some Z's to you and that I was trying to prank you, but your passionate ramblings about me are really making me start regretting the whole thing now! There are limits to these things, you know...*

Soukichi's confession of his adoration was way too pure and way too intense for her. He fully conveyed his feelings to her to such a degree that she wished the earth under her would swallow her whole from the amount of embarrassment that she was currently enduring.

I was already convinced my body and mind were reaching their limits, she grumbled, *but then he had to mention the whole "sunflower" thing. I had no idea he'd put so much effort into that simple comparison back then! Ugh... God! That's all you're gonna get from me, Kuroya! An ugh! Have another one! Ugh! Look at what you've done to me! I'm doomed to a lifetime of grunting because of you!*

How come you immediately speak your mind when you think I'm not listening? With how shy and difficult you typically are, somebody could've told me a clone kidnapped you and taken your place, and I wouldn't have been any the wiser, she mulled. *Why did you have to arrange a nasty attack on me when I least expected it?*

"..."

Haah, I suppose that's just the kind of guy Kuroya is, though, Kasumi sighed. *Now that I think back on it, he was kinda the same on that day. He was so honest and manly when he believed he was the only one in the room.*

She then reminisced about that fateful day in question, the day on which they had ended up becoming a "trial couple."

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It was after school. Kasumi had gotten held up with one of her friends and, as a result, headed toward the clubroom at a later time than Soukichi had. What lied in waiting for her was an out-of-the-blue confession of love through the door.

"I like you," Soukichi said those words that rocked Kasumi's world to its very core. He stood frozen in place, her hand that was about to reach for the door handle now suspended in mid-air.

Wha... Huh?! That was clearly Kuroya's voice, right? Did he just say... "I like you"? she questioned confusedly.

"I've always liked you, Shiramori. Will you please go out with me?" he added.

"...Gah!" she groaned.

Wait! Wait a second! Hold the flipping phone! Wh-What did I hear?! W-Was that a confession? Kuroya said Shiramori, didn't he? Wait, so it's a confession from Kuroya to me?! So that would mean... Kuroya is in love with me? Whaaa?!

"Nah, no way. Haah, nobody would have a bad time if everyone could confess their love that easily, right?" she cast off the idea.

“Man, the confession shouldn’t be all boring and straightforward like that. I need to add some spice to it if a loner like is ever gonna have a chance with her,” Soukichi said in a critical tone, not knowing that the girl he was talking about was eavesdropping on him from the other side of the door.

I guess he really is practicing his confession. Well, I guess it’s more of a “saying it out loud” sort of thing than real practice, she thought. *Either way, it looks like him being fond of me is true, after all. So Kuroya likes me, huh...*

“...”

I did pick up on some hints that he was into me, if I’m being frank. Like, there were some moments where I had my suspicions when we were doing some club activities together, but I never had any proof of it until now, Kasumi reflected. *Since I had no real way of confirming how he truly felt about me, I figured that all could’ve just been castles in Spain on my part*. *And yet here I am, finding out about it in the most unexpected of ways.*

“Ahhh, I love you, Shiramori. I love you so very much,” Soukichi whispered to himself, his genuine feelings spilling out from the inner depths of his heart as he was still blissfully unaware that Kasumi was listening with rapt attention to his every affectionate word. “I wanna go out with you, become a couple, and do everything else that comes with it!”

“...Argh,” she squeaked.

“I wanna tell you how much I love you, hold hands with you, go on dates with you, walk home with you after school, I want you to surprise me by waiting for me on our way to school in the morning, I wanna ride together on the bike, message you everyday, have you come to my house again, and take a selfie with you,” his effusive rant continued.

“I-I... Ah?!” She stood dumbfounded upon hearing him express his yearnings and beginning to develop a blush of her own. Soukichi sounded extremely impassioned as he laid out his desires, making for a superfluous showing of the innocent love he held for her—

“I also wanna see those massive milkers of hers, feel them, grope them...” he said, as he began to go down a less wholesome route with his tirade.

Okay, maybe not as innocent as I had hoped. But, umm, I guess that’s pretty normal for a guy his age, she concluded.

“Haah, I wanna do all that... couple stuff like flirting and whatnot when she’s my girlfriend,” he voiced his bare, unfiltered thoughts without needing to resort to any theatrical vocabulary. His sentiments weren't only pure, but also resonated well with the jumbled mess of an adolescent heart set ablaze with the fire of love.

Soukichi’s affection for Kasumi sparkled with a glitter peculiar to that of a jewel, with burning lust infused deep within. Perhaps that was why she could tell his love for her was sincere. Perhaps that was why Kasumi—who

at first was quite shocked—was now paying close attention to what he had to say.

The surprise and nervousness she felt would soon turn into bliss. She was on cloud nine; she had never felt such joy or delight in her entire life. And the reason for that was she had also harbored similar feelings toward Soukichi.

"K-Kuroya," she abruptly found herself opening the door, driven forward by her emotions. She'd already made her decision. More specifically, she was set to accept his confession on the spot. However...

"Oh. You're kinda late today, Shiramori."

In contrast to a euphoric Kasumi, Soukichi greeted her with icy composure. He had his customary poker face on, his enamored attitude from a moment ago having dissipated into thin air.

"..."

"Why're you just standing there with a blank look on your face? Close the door, and come on in," he questioned.

"..."

"Could you close it all the way, please? You sometimes leave a tiny gap open, and honestly, it really bothers me."

I-Is this guy for real?! she complained. *You were being so romantic a moment ago, going on about how much you loved me and everything, that it made ME blush! I had no idea you could switch from being Romeo to deadpan that quickly. Not gonna lie, I'm actually quite impressed. But aren't you trying a little too hard to act tough here?*

"Yeah, yeah. Heard you loud and clear," Kasumi responded in her regular calm demeanor, then shut the door behind her. Her exhilaration had waned a little, and was replaced by slight aggravation. *Gah. Kuroya, you massive wimp, trying to feign indifference when you're all over me when I'm not around! I know you love me to bits, you hear me!!!*

"It's just a stupid door. No need to make such a big deal out of it. Sheesh, so fussy about the smallest of things," she commented.

"It's less about me being fussy and you being messy, from my point of view."

"Hey, that's not nice. You might end up on my bad side if you keep that meanie attitude of yours, mister."

"...I don't particularly care about being in your good graces, thank you."

Liar, liar, pants on fire! That's exactly what you care about right now, Kuroya! I know everything! she objected in her mind. *Those are some big words for someone who's head over heels for me. Argh... For pete's sake! What is up with this guy? You could just confess how much you love me face to face! Then I'll... I'll...*

“So what we got going on today? Playing some Reversi again?” he inquired.

“Yup, I guess so,” she replied. On the surface, she wore a smile and interacted with him in her usual manner, whereas beneath the surface, a whirlpool of indescribable, violent emotions had begun forming. Those uncontrollable feelings only kept bloating further and further as they played Reversi until they were on the verge of bursting.

Maybe that’s why I said what I said after we were finished...

“You like me, don’t you?”

“So, do you wanna try going out with me?”

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“...Hmm, gnaawww,” Kasumi let out a fake yawn, pretending to wake up after she was done recollecting the past.

“Oh hey, you’re finally awake,” Soukichi said.

“Oh, Kuroya...? Did I fall asleep?” she asked, getting right into her playacting immediately.

“Would appear so,” he answered. Thankfully for Kasumi, he appeared unaware of the fact Kasumi was faking her slumber the whole time. While she was relieved everything worked out well, she couldn’t stop herself from feeling mildly disgruntled at his slow-wittedness.

“Did you try anything funny while I was out cold?” she probed.

“Nope.”

“Hmm, really now? Your adorable girlfriend was yours for the taking, and you’re telling me no *mischief* took place?”

“Yes. I didn’t lay a single finger on you.”

Should’ve seen that coming. The sweet, cutesy Kuroya took to his heels and left an unfeeling machine behind, just like back when he was rehearsing his confession, she thought. *Oh well. At least I know that he’s lying about him not laying a finger on me because we did touch fingertips!*

Ugh, why not just fully grab my hand like a man if you’re gonna touch it anyways! she murmured. *I wouldn’t have even minded if you forcefully hugged me either, you know! But no, the best you could do was touch, practically graze my finger. Haah, seriously. Just how pure is this guy?*

“...Hehe,” she chuckled. *Still, this is the Kuroya I know and fell in love with and all.*

“Why are you laughing?” he inquired.

“Nothing, don’t worry about it. How about we play a game of Reversi now that I’m up and at em?” she proposed.

“Sure, I guess,” he accepted in a curt tone, onboard with her invitation. Kasumi then took the Reversi set off of the shelf and placed it between them

on the table. They placed four disks in the central squares, signaling the start of the game. Kasumi, of course, was playing using the white disks, while Soukichi used the black ones.

"Wanna put a friendly bet on the line?" she asked.

"I always drop the bag when there's something on the line, so I'll pass."

"Whaaa? What are you, chicken?"

"Leave me alone. I'm just not good at handling pressure. I've basically established a reputation of choking when it matters most, I'm so bad at it."

"I think that's all in your head, though," she muttered.

"Huh?"

"Nah, it's nothing," Kasumi shook her head, glossing over the slip of tongue she made. She wondered if Soukichi felt the same about the game of "love" they were both a part of.

I'm willing to bet that he believes he has a massive losing record, that I'm in complete control of this relationship and have him kept firmly under my thumb。 It may even feel to him like he's having his figurative disks flipped at a rapid pace, with the board quickly being taken over by my color. But the fact of the matter is...

"Hey, Kuroya. You know the strategy needed to win in Reversi?" she questioned.

"Strategy? Well, there's a ton of tips out there that you can use to your advantage."

"Alright, tell me the most basic ones."

"It's a good idea to focus on taking the corners, for example. You should also avoid making 'walls,' as in uninterrupted lines of disks," he explained. "Some would say to keep things peaceful in the early game and not flip too many pieces, as well. "

"Mhmm, that's right," she snickered, having heard the answer she was looking for.

"What is it now?"

"Nooothing at all. Just focus on the game," she cooed. Taking things slowly in the early stages of the game was one of the fundamental strategies in Reversi, because the advantage would essentially be on the side of whatever player occupies the least amount of cells at the beginning. Hence, it was best not to outflank too many disks during the opening proceedings and allow the opponent to turn over as many disks as possible instead in order to narrow down their options in the following turns.

In other words, the player who's too eager to occupy more spots on the board right from the get-go will end up losing the match, she thought. *Maybe that exact same logic extends to the game of "love," too.*

“Hmm,” Soukichi contemplated his next move now that the match was getting more intricate.

“Kuroya,” she called his name, the urge to tease him welling up from seeing him with such a serious expression on his face.

“Yes?”

“I love you.”

“Wh-What’s gotten into you?!”

“Hmm? I’m psyching you out, obviously. Pretty standard tactic.”

“Come on now. That’s a low blow.”

“Hehe, if you say so, tomato face. You really are weak against surprise attacks, though, huh?”

“Whatever, I’ll bring some earplugs with me next time and shut that tactic of yours down.”

“Nice idea, but I could just exploit the fact you still have eyes.”

“...I’ll wear an eye mask, too.”

“Hahaha! How will you be able to play then, you silly goose?”

Their pleasant conversation which was par for the course for them continued, with Kasumi looking to be the one holding the reins. This dynamic of their relationship had been the same since some time ago, but the pecking order had been further consolidated after they started dating.

Chances are I won’t be in the driver’s seat for long. I can feel it in my bones. I will lose to Kuroya one day, she whispered to herself as she gazed at him. *I’m so sorry I couldn’t wait for your confession, Kuroya. It was because of me and my pretentious suggestion for us to become a “trial couple” that you don’t have the courage to confess anymore...*

Remember when I said that you pretended to be tough and weren’t honest with me? Well, turns out I’m not so different from you, she thought. *I’m way too embarrassed to lay bare my love for you, instead just poking fun at you from behind a patronizing facade.*

But please forgive me. I won’t be able to keep this going forever, she pleaded. *I’ll soon be so madly in love with you that I can’t think straight, and I won’t be able to act so overbearing anymore.*

In Reversi terms, the board was overwhelmingly cluttered with Kasumi’s white pieces placed on it. She might appear in a highly advantageous position, but Reversi was a game that favors the play that allows their opponent to occupy the most amount of cells from the first move.

That’s why I’ll eventually be losing this match. Kuroya will outflank all of my disks and dye over my entire heart with his hue, she thought. *The thing is I want to lose to you, Kuroya. I want you to render me hopelessly lovestruck as quickly as you can, for my heart to be awash with your own distinct color...*

You know what, though? I sorta enjoy our current relationship in and of itself. She then asked Soukichi, albeit only internally. *So would you let me... continue to act all mature with you? Would you let me tease you like I have been until now? Can we just... stay as we are for now?*

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Afterword

I am of the firm belief that the girl you like discovering that you like her is an extremely critical issue for those in their adolescent years. Because it's kind of like you're putting your insecurities on full display or surrendering incisive power over to your partner. This is especially humiliating for guys who have a strong pride and are rather self-conscious. As said guys get up there in years, they might end up maturing and realizing that it isn't "shameful" to be in love with whomever... but that's too much to expect of a tryhard teenager. They tend to be embarrassed with themselves for falling in love and view themselves as pathetic. They get frustrated with their heart of which they have no control over and find themselves stricken with an unrelenting feeling of failure. Falling in love is seen as being put in a precarious position or even an admission of defeat. But we both know that the most important thing to keep in mind is that the "defeat" doesn't necessarily condemn them to losing the game. You never know who's going to be crowned the winner in the end, regardless of who did or didn't "lose" at the start of the relationship.

Now that all of that is out of the way, allow me to introduce myself: my name is Kota Nozomi, the author of this book.

I bring to you this new rom-com work centered around a loner with a hot and cold personality who's fallen in love, and a stunning senior who knows of his fondness for her. I've only been writing works that feature older heroines as of late, and this is another one to add to the pile. For this series, I'm thinking of aiming to delve into the charm of being with a senior heroine who's only one year older than the protagonist. The plan is to work toward making it more of a one-on-one rom-com rather than a harem of multiple heroines... Well, the protagonist isn't exactly fit for that type of setting in either case. I only just realized upon having finished writing the first novel, but the only girl Kuroya had spoken to other than Shiramori throughout the whole book was his mother...

My initial thoughts were to involve the members of the "Four Heavenly Beauties" into the story more, but I had so much fun writing the dialogue of the two main characters that the book ended without me actually doing much else. Those girls will most certainly have a bigger role in the second volume. Probably.

Lastly, I would like to extend a few words of gratitude.

I would like to thank my supervisor, Nakamizo. I appreciate everything you've done for me. You put up with even the smallest of adjustments I suggested, such as wanting certain things to be moved "one millimeter to the right," and I'm truly grateful to you for that.

I would also like to thank Hyoga Azuri, the artist for the book. Thank you so much for your wonderful illustrations! Shiramori is adorable, and Kuroya turned out pretty cute himself! I look forward to working with you more in the future.

And last, but not least, I would like to offer my sincerest gratitude to everyone who read the book.

Now then, I hope we cross paths again in the second volume.

Kota Nozomi.

Glossary

The reason why Soukichi and Kasumi settled on always using the black disks and the white disks respectively—as mentioned in the first chapter—lies in the fact that the first kanji in Soukichi's last name, *Kuro*ya, contains the character meaning the color "black" (黒, read as "kuro") while the first kanji in Kasumi's last name, *Shira*mori, has the character which denotes the color "white" (白, read as "shira" in this case).

Sticking to the theme of black and white "disks," the author decided to use a black dot • which indicates when the story transitions into following Soukichi's perspective, and a white one ◦ when the narration is being carried out by Kasumi.

The significance of the names for the main characters doesn't stop there, however, and this can be seen during other parts of the novel, as well. For one, Soukichi, much like his name would suggest, is cynical about most things, whereas Kasumi is more lighthearted and upbeat. Another indication of this can be found in the title of Soukichi's novel, because Kasumi was, in more ways than one, the literal *white* light that helped him to overcome his trauma.